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SLAM

5th Annual
**PLAYOFF
BLOWOUT!**
Cover 1 of 3

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8



LEBRON JAMES

LEBRON JAMES LEBRON JAMES LEBRON JA



TONY PARKER
ARE THE SPURS FINISHED?



STEPHEN CURRY
WILL THE DUBS' STYLE WORK?

ROCKET POWER

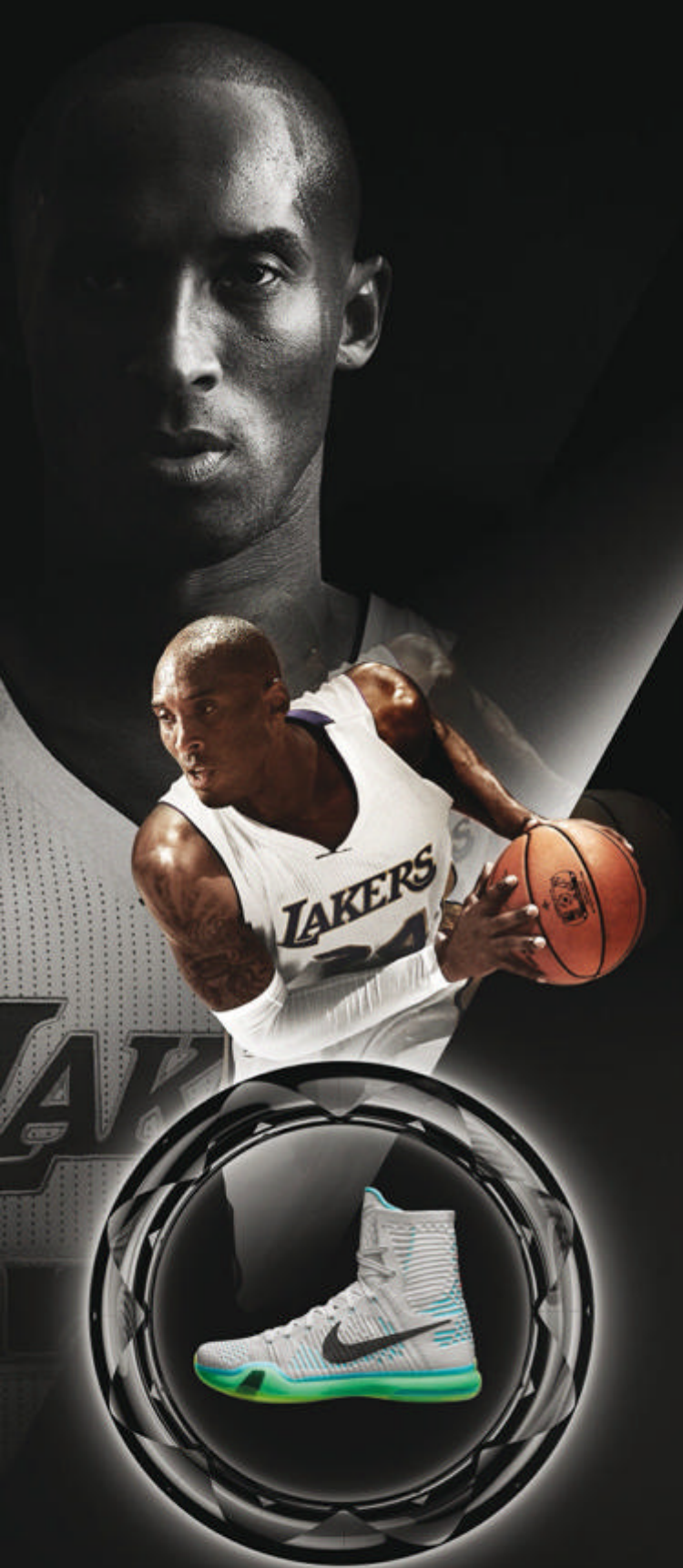
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IN THE PAINT

SLAM no. 188 | JUNE 2015

PG. 36

Who will win this year's Title? Our special Playoff coverage ranges from Harden to Westbrook, from Tony to LeBron.



ROSTER

36. Upper Echelon

Whether or not you like the way **James Harden** plays, you have to admit he's as efficient and valuable as they come.

42. Energy

Having tantalized observers for years, **Russell Westbrook** has put it all together for the injury-plagued Thunder.

48. Two of a Kind

One splash at a time, **Stephen Curry and Klay Thompson** have shot the Warriors into Title contention.

52. ATLast?

Will this be the year that the **Atlanta Hawks** reward their long-suffering fans with a real post-season run?

58. Sorry 4 the Wait

Today's fans want results NOW!!! **LeBron James** and the Cavs just needed a couple of months.

62. All Business, Man

People who say the Spurs lack commercial-friendly superstars conveniently forget **Tony Parker**.

66. Weird Rob

No one in the NBA does the dirty work better than Portlandia's **Robin Lopez**.

68. Tuff Stuff

In an era when players' bodies were always put to the test, **Bailey Howell** made a mark with his endurance.

Harden: Bill Baptist/NBAE via Getty Images; Jeff Haynes/NBAE via Getty Images; ATL: Scott Cunningham/NBAE via Getty Images; LeBron: Andrew D. Bernstein/NBAE via Getty Images; Warriors: Jeff Haynes/NBAE via Getty Images; Tony: Scott Cunningham/NBAE via Getty Images; Westbrook: Andrew D. Bernstein/NBAE via Getty Images; Al Bello/Getty Images; Noah Graham/NBAE via Getty Images; This page: Joe Murphy/NBAE via Getty Images



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IN THE PAINT

SLAM no. 188 JUNE 2015

FRONTCOURT

12. Trash Talk

We're honestly sorry that this section has been one page the last couple of months. It's been an ad/business thing more than a lack of letters. Trust: they still come, and they still rule (well, most of them).

15. Hype

Checking in with Kendrick Lamar's gangsta lean, DeMar DeRozan was one hardworking teen and Charlie V hits the Playoff scene. Plus, In Your Faces on Big Baby Davis, Kyle O'Quinn, D'Angelo Russell and Hassan Whiteside and a Dime Drop worth waking up for.

32. Kicks On Court

Spring is (finally) here!

34. Slamadamonth

Much to this Wildcats' chagrin, March sure did come in like a lion.

BACKCOURT

72. The Fan

The Playoffs are the perfect time for a fresh cut and fresh gear.

74. Kicks Off Court

Better late than never.

75. Kicks Extra

Fly new elite shoes, and a dope new store that may sell them some day.

76. Punks

Wind down the 2014-15 season with prep stars Isaiah Briscoe, Tyler Dorsey, Malik Newman, Katie McWilliams, DeJounte Murray and Caleb Swanigan.

81. Frozen Moment

It coulda been the Oklahoma City MVPs.

PG. 76

You'll never guess where elite guard Isaiah Briscoe is going to college.



SLAM

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**SUMMER HOOPS
IS BACK. IT ALL
STARTS HERE.**



**INSIDE
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**TEAM
OVERVIEW**

**THE
KICKS**

4/10-4/12 HAMPTON, VA
4/24-4/26 LEXINGTON, KY
5/8-5/10 HOUSTON, TX
5/23-5/25 MINNEAPOLIS, MN

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THE SIXTH MAN

There's been a lot of chatter lately about the NBA being at an all-time high. I'm not sure about all that, what with at least four teams trying to lose and another handful so bad I can't tell. Not to mention an Eastern Conference so uninspiring we have respected coaches talking about where Kentucky would place if they were in it.

What I am digging, though, is the offense on display in the League these days, especially during March Madness when games end in the 50s like they were being played in the '50s. Some of these NBA offenses, though? These cats can fill it up.

Look at our three main cover subjects this month. You've got James Harden, notching 27 points a game on seemingly nothing more than drives, threes and free throws like some sort of Daryl Morey Frankenstein, optimally built to score in 2015. You've got the Splash Hermanos, living up to my man Mark Jackson's lofty predictions with two of the sweetest jumpers the game has ever seen. And lastly, the long-boring Hawks, rejuvenated by coach Mike Budenholzer and skillfully spreading around their 103 ppg to a broad cast of "stars" in the best team-first system we've seen this side of the Alamo. And I didn't even get to this month's lead feature subject, Russell Westbrook (pg. 42), kept off the cover only by our fear that the snake-bit Thunder are too injured to do much in the Playoffs. But he's scoring at a greater—and more explosive—pace than any of these other guys.

The end result is a modern NBA product that puts up some duds once in a while, and occasionally seems to lack the intense passion of a generation ago, but can be hella fun to watch. And now that we're entering the Playoffs, maybe it will all coalesce. Think about it: The shitty teams will be gone for the summer, and even the offense-first teams will have to put forth maximum effort on the defensive end as well. Who knows? Maybe this occasionally grumpy old man will be singing a whole new song next month.

Peace,



Ben Osborne



OFF THE BENCH Sherman Johnson

New York City-based writer Sherman Johnson has been contributing to SLAM and SLAMonline for nearly a decade. His work, usually book, film and music reviews (like this month's, which can be found in Under Review on pg. 25) have also appeared in *XXL*, *KING* and *Complex* magazines as well as *The Village Voice* and *HipHopDX*. The University of Michigan alum's playing career began on the streetyards of eastside Detroit and now plays in uptown Manhattan whenever he can. An inveterate bibliophile, moonlighting professional deejay and fiend for the sweet science, Sherm will also ride anything with two wheels. Learn more about his diverse interests at blacknaga.net.



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WILD 'N OUT

Stephen Curry totally deserves all the attention he's getting from SLAM and everyone else!!!
Go Warriors!!

Jonathan Swanson // via Facebook



I'm getting a copy of this Kentucky cover; that way I'll have something to wipe my ass with.
BRAD HOYT // VIA FACEBOOK

I love SLAM even more now that Kentucky is on the cover. #BBN
SARAH STEWART // VIA FACEBOOK

The best ever? Get off their nuts.
DARRYL FRAZIER // VIA FACEBOOK

I've been a UK fan since Jamal Mashburn...Who's really stopping us? Nobody, we're going

all the way.
CHRISTOPHER MOREHEAD // VIA FACEBOOK

I trust you keep your copy of SLAM 187 in great condition.—Ed.

WHAT'S COOKIN'?

The Steph Curry issue was bangin'. He is my new favorite player. I love his game and how hard he worked to get to this level. Like Mark Jackson said, it couldn't have happened to a better person. That article on Faried was dope, too. It's great to hear about the adversity a person experienced and how they overcome it. I'm from Brooklyn and know a lot about hoop dreams, and like Jay rapped, I've seen 'em deflate. So that article on NYC PGs, or the lack thereof in the L, was timely. And that article on Malik Sealy was necessary. I went to a BBQ this past summer and some of his family was there. Malik's mother Ann was sharing stories about him. And Malik's pops was chillin'. Great day. You know it's complete nonsense that his killer gets three years and the opportunity to get multiple slaps

on the wrist while brothas are out here getting serious time for petty drug offenses. This system needs an overhaul. RIP Malik Sealy. RIP MALCOLM "MALIK" X. RASHAD "SPIZZ" SMITH // VIA EMAIL
Great letter, thank you.—Ed.

I just got through reading the Curry article in Issue 186 and it was pretty good. I must say, it is difficult being a small player, but with hard work, determination, a positive attitude and not constantly talking trash while staying humble, anything is possible. This article helped to realize you must play both sides of the court to be successful.

JORDAN GARCIA // VIA FACEBOOK

I just got through reading your letter and it was pretty good.—Ed.

My nephew, Kane Fife, is a big fan of SLAM magazine. He is only 9 and reads them cover to cover. He loves basketball. He also copies all of their dunks on a hoop in his room. He is very good. He received his new SLAM and saw someone had drawn a picture so I told him I'd try and

get his in SLAM, too.
SHARON NEVIUS ON BEHALF OF KANE FIFE // VIA EMAIL

Mission accomplished! See left.—Ed.

What's up SLAM!? I've had a subscription since the John Wall cover. However, my love for the game has unfortunately died out. The past few years, school ball completely killed my joy for the game; burnout, a hellish experience my freshman year and my commitment to soccer were the main factors. I tried to ball a lil bit in intramurals this year and had flashes of the old joy, but I just couldn't get that flame rekindled. You guys, however, are the only outlet that keeps my interest for basketball. Who knows, in the future I might find that passion again, and I know you guys will be the reason. So, I'd like to thank the SLAM family for their work, you guys are truly inspirational.

ALEC RITTGERS // VALPARAISO, IN

Can I get a pair of shoes for free LOL plz.
IRENA LEWIS // VIA FACEBOOK
LOL no.—Ed.

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- Rick M. Costa Mesa, CA

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- Jay P., Roeland Park, KS

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- Gary A. Benicia, CA

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- M. Ohmit, Akron, OH

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- B. Regimand, Chicago, IL

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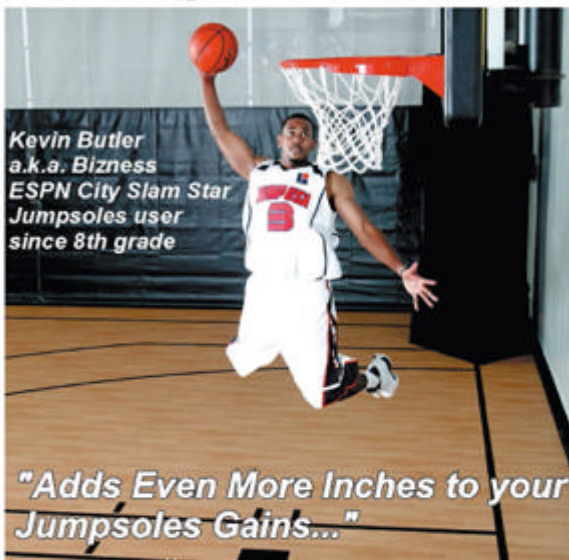
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HYPE



THE OPENING TIP

Always by Rick Telander

Yes, it was snowing and blowing outside, but inside it was warm as springtime, happy as a half-court swish.

It was the First Annual Super-Duper All-Star Weekend #SLAMxAND1 Salute-To-All-Things-Hoop Funfest, held directly across the street from Barclays Center on Valentine's Day, just before the 2015 NBA Slam Dunk Contest and Three-Point Contest began on the Brooklyn Nets' home court.

I made up that title for the party, but I like it. All kinds of

happy people came into the (soon-to-be) jam-packed, three-level space on Flatbush Avenue, with free drinks, food and a DJ—Sean Malcolm—whose bass lines made the front window with the AND1 and SLAM logos jiggle like a fat lady. The vibrations made the windmill dunker going across the front look like he was shimmy-ing into a hurricane.

The photo above was snatched before the event got hopping, because soon it was sneaker-to-elbow, rolling out

the door, with everybody from SLAM staffers to AND1 execs to New York ballers Rafer Alston, Kenny Anderson and Lance Stephenson in attendance. There were rappers and writers, jump-shooters and journalists, some cheerily pre-partying before heading to the All-Star events across the street.

There were old *Heaven Is a Playground* characters from Foster Park in Flatbush there, including Li'l Cameron (who'd spent one hot summer night many years ago, urged on by

pals, trying desperately to dunk on a net-less rim), Doodie from the Subway Stars, and—this one blew my mind and sense of mortality—even L'il Doodie (actual names: Mark Bailey and Mark Bailey Jr.).

I was there in my official capacity as Basketball Evangelist, and I'd like to think I helped baptize a few wavering souls into the glorious kingdom of ball and spread the gospel of game to the already converted. What a time it was. Thank you, SLAM and everybody, AND1 and all!

Courtesy of AND1

INSIDE: CHARLAMAGNE THA GOD finishes his breakfast /// LEBRON JAMES as poetry /// ANTHONY MASON will always be loved /// D'ANGELO RUSSELL + more...

IN YOUR FACE

YEEEEAH BABY

GLEN DAVIS

Los Angeles Clippers, 6-9, F

On a roster teeming with shot blockers, facilitators and scoring threats, Glen "Big Baby" Davis embodies something that isn't manifested elsewhere on the Los Angeles Clippers franchise: a spark. Only that's not how he chooses to describe it.

"I'm the guy that does things no one else wants to do," Davis says. "The blue-collar guy. Or janitor."

It can be easy to forget, but there was a stretch from 1985-2010 when the Clips went to the postseason just four times. Now, Lob City is a perennial Playoff team with a realistic shot at an NBA title.

Last summer, as an unrestricted free agent, Davis chose to return to Los Angeles. A former champion with the Celtics, Baby wanted to play where he felt another ring was within reach, even if it meant coming off the bench.

"There were a couple of teams on my list when I had to choose, but ultimately it was the opportunity to play with a title contender," Davis says. "That's what this League is about: Championships. Not to mention, an opportunity to play with Doc [Rivers] again."

Which isn't to say this season has been easy. In the days leading up to the trade deadline, the Clippers were rumored to be in the market for reserve bigs like Amar'e Stoudemire. But LAC stood pat, choosing to rock with Baby instead. His averages don't jump off the page: 4.1 points and 2.3 rebounds in 12 minutes a game. But Davis is shooting 47 percent from the floor, and in recent weeks, has been the frenetically energized wild card the Clippers so desperately need; he often brings the Staples Center crowd to its feet with hustle plays.

"I think that a lot of teams have already hit their stride, and we are just now starting to jell," Davis says. "We have added a few pieces, starting to play better as a group. I am really excited to get back to full strength—I want another ring." —JOSH PLANOS

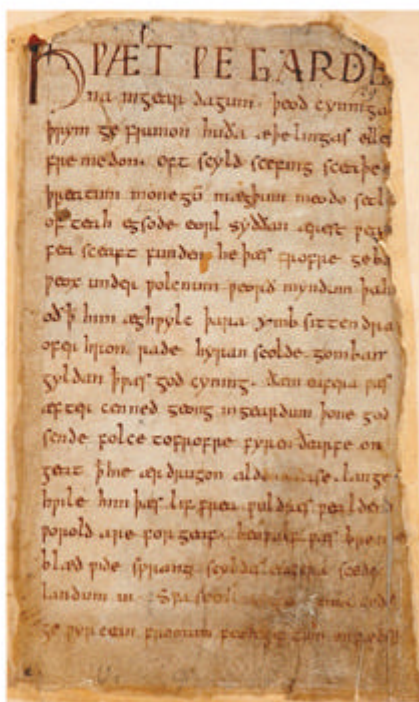


Andrew D. Bernstein/NBAE via Getty Images

NOYZ

Dear prospective SLAM employees: Cory Johnson has not been the Editor of SLAM SINCE 1994. If you're hoping to work for us, you should probably reach out to a more current employee.....10 points (and a free retweet) for anyone who caught the classic SLAM reference on the Warriors cover (issue and player names needed).....What is located between the Mexican embassy and Polish consulate? The SLAM street, of course. Now, does that make the SLAM street a basketball metaphor for a Jorge Gutiérrez-Marcin

VAGUELY LITERARY



LeBron, you've been through a lot, and it's been analyzed to death and beyond, much like your recommended reading. *Beowulf* is the story of a young warrior prince, more physically gifted than anyone else. He leaves home as a mercenary for glory. He finds that glory when he fights and defeats the monster Grendel and then Grendel's mother. Those battles are like your two Championship rings in Miami, but a greater challenge awaits both Beowulf and yourself back at home.

Fifty years after killing the monsters, he has been a great King, a revered veteran warrior like you. As you have learned this year, going back home presents its own set of challenges. You needed to get your roster in shape and teach your men how to win, while everyone circled your kingdom looking for a sign of weakness that King James is no longer the King. For Beowulf, the other tribes are watching, waiting for the king to fall so they can attack his people. Home is also under assault from a ferocious dragon. Beowulf knows he will die in this last great battle, but he must fight to secure his legacy in the only challenge worthy of a living legend.

Your greatest challenge is winning that extremely elusive ring for your hometown, which has been cursed as sadistically as any realm in a fictional epic. This is a battle that will take everything you've got, all of the experience you gained playing for championships, while your physical dominance begins to abandon you at your age. Your teammates will have to help you as

Beowulf's men had to come to his aid when he faced the dragon alone. It may come down to a well-placed dagger after the dragon has bitten you, as the poison drains your life. Metaphorically! Like someone else making a play when you are tired. Are you able to inspire Kyrie, Kevin, Iman and the rest of your men to sacrifice for you as you could once exert constant energy for 48 minutes?

Yeah, it's dramatic. You'll love it. We all saw you reading *The Hunger Games*, which does have obvious parallels to a Playoff run. But that's kids stuff. This is the origin, the Bill Russell to Anthony Davis. With the way the Eastern Conference has played out, you have some relaxing time before the Playoffs, enough time to read an epic saga before you craft your own. —SAM RUBENSTEIN



ROOKIE DIARY with AARON GORDON

The season...

went by so fast. Between getting drafted, summer camp, debuting, getting hurt and coming back, I feel like it's been no time at all. With that said, I'm not done growing. There's still a few games left, and I'm going to make the best of it. I have a lot to learn, and I'm gonna do my best to learn it as fast as possible. But I don't want to just talk about it, I want people to be able to see it. So...

Of course...

I'm watching March Madness, in my down time, especially my Arizona boys. I dunno where they'll be by the time you read this, but they are looking good right now! I said before the season that they had the talent, but it's good to see them getting results. I still have a lot of friends on the team, so you know I'm rooting for them.

The Rookie of the Year...

race is interesting. Everyone is looking at Andrew Wiggins, and for good reason, but my guy EP [Elfrid Payton] is nice. It's easy to overlook him, but he's playing at a high level. I mean, just watch as he gets used to playing in the League. He's going to be a problem, and I'm excited for the chance to grow and play with him.

It's too early...

to have real plans for the summer, but I know I'm gonna spend a lot of time in Cali. I think I'm going to rent a place and just work out for a while there. I love Orlando, but it'll be good to be back in my home state near my friends and family. I'm going to enjoy some Cali living and put in a lot of work. Otherwise, I'm just waiting for the season to end before making any grand plans.

Line of the Month

BY SHANNON BOOHER

LYRICS OF THE MONTH: "Gotta see how I'm chillin' once I park this luxury car/Hopping out feeling big as Mutombo," "How Much A Dollar Cost"; "I'm imaginin' Denzel be lookin' at O'Neal," "How Much A Dollar Cost"; "Or jump high enough to get Michael Jordan endorsements," "The Blacker The Berry." Kendrick may no longer be jealous of Arron Afflalo, and his latest album *To Pimp A Butterfly* may have flown right over the heads of those caterpillars mostly intrigued by the drum, but the NBA still infiltrates his pen-game. **WHO WANT WHAT OF THE MONTH:** Meanwhile, Russell Westbrook just gave NBA fans the basketball version of Kendrick's "Control" verse, notching six triple-doubles in one eight-game stretch, running roughshod over the league and forcing his way into the MVP conversation. Will a Finals run require a more subtle Russ? Or will we ever know? Ibaka's injury further stacks the odds against the Thunder even reaching May this season.



Gortat pick-and-roll? Not necessarily. You could have Maciej Lampe feeding Horacio Llamas in the post.... Congrats to Steve Nash, who we will choose to remember for his awesome, team-first, run-and-gun, MVP-caliber play during his prime, and not the douchey, money-hungry, me-first attitude he exhibited the last few years. We have a hunch he'll do some cool stuff in retirement.... Gotta wonder what Lil' Penny thought when the Secret Service put someone new in charge. You know, because they couldn't guard him. No, really, that's what the Lil' Penny doll actually said. Like, all the time....

TRUE TO THE GAME

Compton's in the House

Cali native **DeMar DeRozan** has become a star in Canada, but he never forgets where he came from.

DeMar DeRozan is a Compton, CA, kid through and through, one whose game blossomed on the city parks, gymnasiums and streets of Los Angeles. In 2009, the Toronto Raptors drafted him with the ninth pick in the NBA Draft after one season at the University of Southern California. Until that point, the 6-6 DeRozan, who gets "Comp10" customized inside each pair of his sneakers, had never lived beyond a 30-minute radius of his parents' home. Moving north of the border, and thousands of miles away, he continued to develop his game and became an NBA All-Star five years later.

SLAM: How did you fall in love with the game?

DD: I fell in love with the game just by watching my dad play sports, and I was always watching sports. I think it's like a manly thing, watching whatever your father did at a young age and I just took heed to that, and as I got older and just playing around and him pushing me with every sport. But I think I found passion in basketball at an early age. I grew up watching the Lakers and Bulls, I think it all stemmed from that.

SLAM: How old were you?

DD: I think I started playing organized basketball when I was 5 or 6. From then on out I just really kept at it, it was fun. As a kid you're playing for fun, from playing video games, watching your favorite players play and trying to reenact what they do on Fisher Price courts and everything like that and it just grew from then on out.

SLAM: What were some of your favorite courts as a kid growing up?

DD: I probably played at every park in Compton, honestly. I don't really have a favorite one, but every park in the city of Compton I played in. I played in the leagues and was a part of youth teams, too, California Team Select, South Coast All-Stars, there were a few teams that I came up with, played with a lot of great players and to just see how far I came from then is just amazing.

SLAM: Do you remember playing in your very first organized game?

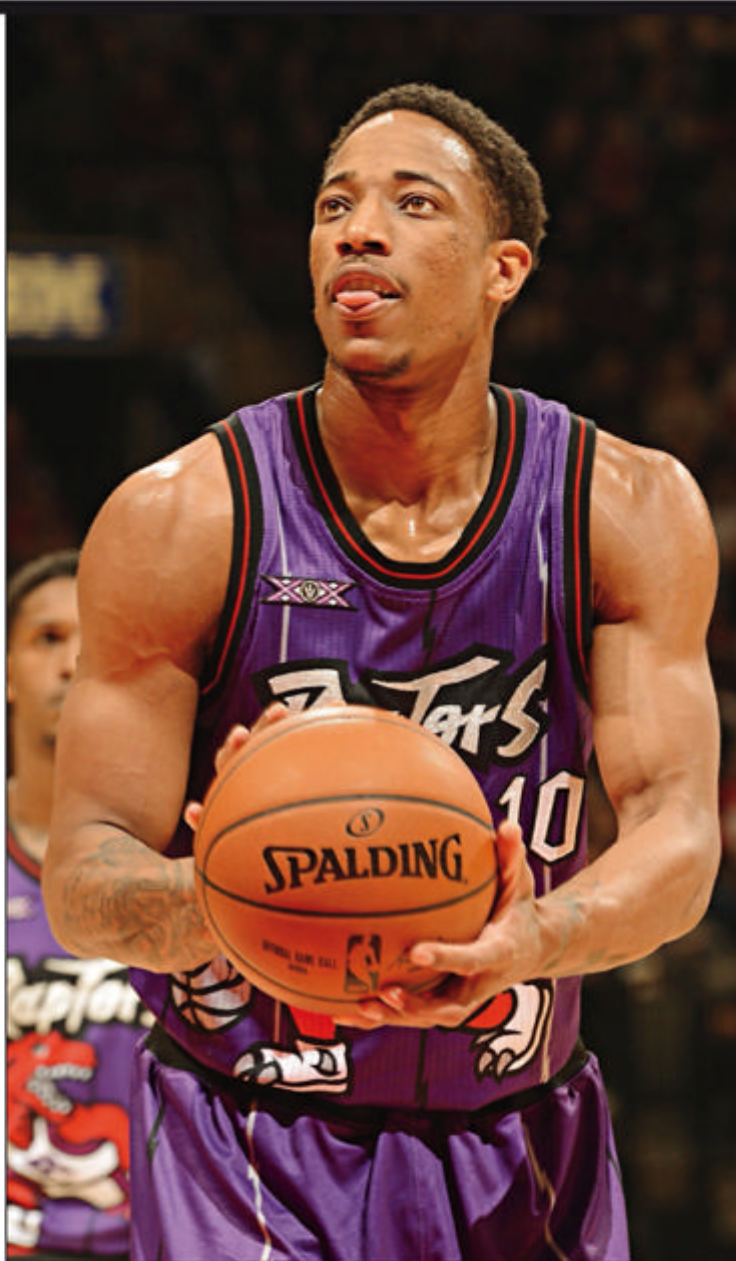
DD: I just remember that I was terrible. I was sorry, I was throwing the ball out of bounds, running toward the wrong side of the court, I just remember being terrible!

SLAM: Do you remember the point where you realized that basketball was something you enjoyed or wanted to keep playing?

DD: I think that came later on when I really understood the game of basketball, probably when I was 12 years old, 13. You really just see the development of the game coming along, becoming older, more athletic and more skilled. I think that's when I really started realizing this could be something.

SLAM: Do you remember watching any special games as a kid on TV? Do any stand out to you?

DD: For some reason I always used to see the east coast games, like all the ACC games. On the weekends you wake up California time at 9 o'clock, 10 o'clock in the morning, the games would be on and you tend to watch the games and you really didn't know what was going on, but you knew it was basketball. I remember when I



was real young, I always used to wonder why they didn't have their name on the back of their jerseys. Little stuff like that, but I always used to watch it, pay attention to all of it, and once they got to the pros, I remembered the certain players and the colleges they went to and everything.

SLAM: Do you remember your first basketball?

DD: I'm not sure. My dad had

to give me a lot of basketballs when I was young, and we always used to go to the park and play. He always used to beat me, I mean, *always* used to beat me, and when I lost, I would be mad and kick the ball as hard as I could after every single game. He never wanted to go get it, and I never wanted to go get it, so I used to get a new ball every week.

—DUANE WATSON

Ron Turemer/NBAE via Getty Images

NOYZ

Shouts to Jalen Cannon and St Francis (NY) and all the other players/teams we didn't get to this season: Villanova men, Princeton women, Utah men, etc.....We didn't get to UTEP either, but after seeing their official athletic account tweet negative opinions about its best player, presumably to keep him in school, we don't feel bad about it.....If @oldslamads isn't inspiring ad agencies out there, eff them.....We still see you, Jessica Shepard.....Wes Matthews' injury sucked; why are so many of "our" guys going down?.....



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IN YOUR FACE

WAVY

HASSAN WHITESIDE

Miami Heat, 7-0, C

With less than two minutes left of a late-January game in Chicago, Aaron Brooks slipped behind the Miami defense and appeared to have an easy bucket ahead. As he entered the paint, he calmly tossed the ball up toward the backboard, but it never reached the glass.

Instead, Hassan Whiteside's mighty hand got there first, just in time, for his ninth rejection of the game.

Whiteside's ability to whiz his lengthy frame across the floor has helped make his transformation into a top-shelf rim-protector appear seamless. It certainly didn't feel that way for him.

In just the last year, Whiteside has been forced to fend for himself in China, which he refers to as "another planet." He has witnessed car bombings while playing in Lebanon. He has contemplated retirement in his early 20s.

"If I didn't get picked up this year, it would have been really hard for me to go back over there," he admits to thinking before his November promotion from the D-League. "I basically decided, like, I'm just gonna give this thing one more shot."

It's a good thing he did.

The Marshall product has been among the NBA's best centers since breaking through in early January, averaging 11 points, 9.9 rebounds and 2.5 blocks and earning some Fantasy MVP votes. He's stuffing shots on par with Anthony Davis and rebounding like a healthy Dwight Howard.

Still just 25, the 7-foot Whiteside has solidified himself as the anchor on a team with Playoff aspirations. His days of hanging on to basketball's fringes for dear life, praying for an opportunity anywhere on the globe, are over. He is here to stay.

After all he's experienced, though, you might think Whiteside holds some resentment toward the teams that made his path so difficult. Nah.

"Thank you," he says to his old doubters. "Thank you, because I like the place I'm at now." —LEO SEPKOWITZ



Isaac Baldizon/NBAE via Getty Images

NOYZ

Otto Porter played no AAU, was lightly recruited, unheralded at Georgetown and relatively overlooked even after he got drafted with the third pick in the 2013 Draft. Almost two full NBA seasons didn't do much to change his Q Rating. And then he got famous for standing around /.....Ed. had the supreme honor to get to vote for the Julius Erving Award for the nation's best small forward. Hearing about the candidates was fun, Doc was awesome and voter Roy Williams calling out other head coaches for

PIC & ROLL

The Kings are a mess of unexpected proportions, mostly 'cause of their impatient owner. It's certainly not DeMarcus Cousins' fault, as he's proving to be as nice as they come. He can bang, he can handle, he can shoot and he's a pretty good passer, not that too many of his teammates deserve the rock. Boogie's also nice in the old-fashioned way—just ask this lucky kid in Philadelphia.



David Dow/NBAE via Getty Images

not coming on the call to shill for their players was tremendous.....A world without Dave D'Alessandro NBA bylines doesn't make sense to us. Might have to break open that freelance budget again.... If you've never seen Kobe Bryant pick up marbles with his toes while recovering from tearing his Achilles tendon, boy do we have a documentary for you! (It's a very good documentary.).....He Got Game?? Will it include footage of Denzel playing JV ball at Fordham for PJ Carlesimo? And what about Rick Fox as the coach of Tech U?....That "White Iverson" shit is pretty hot. H/T ESchwad and TT!.....



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DIME DROP

RADIOACTIVE

Whether it's about hip-hop or the NBA, **Charlamagne Tha God** speaks his mind.

Charlamagne Tha God is one of the biggest radio personalities working today. He is one of the three co-hosts of "The Breakfast Club" in the morning at Power 105, based out of New York City, and is also one of the lead cast members on MTV2's *Guy Code*. He also co-hosts a podcast that is barely a year old with comedian Andrew Schulz entitled "The Brilliant Idiots" that already averages 200,000 downloads and was ranked in iTunes as one of the best podcasts in 2014. If a rapper, comedian or entertainer are doing their press tour or are in the headlines, Charlamagne is the guy you want to hear an opinion from.

SLAM: I'm more interested in streetball than NBA most of the time—did you follow street basketball when it was hot?

CTG: Yeah, I used to be up on Skip 2 My Lou and Hot Sauce.

SLAM: You got fired four times before from radio, so now you are kind of like a streetball player that made it his own way.

CTG: Absolutely. But that shit won't work in the NBA though. A regular dribble in streetball is a travel in the NBA.

SLAM: Who do you think is the best celebrity basketball player?

CTG: J. Cole. Old school, Master P.

SLAM: Best NBA player-turned-rapper?

CTG: Oh, Shaq. It's not even close. Shaq did records with Biggie Smalls. Shaq went platinum. Shaq was the absolute best. Shaq did "No Hook" with RZA and Method Man. Shaq had concepts.

SLAM: Is there any NBA player you would compare your radio style with?

CTG: I always used to say I was the Allen Iverson of radio because the League hates my image but has to respect my game. Now the same image has gotten me to this point.

SLAM: Did program directors who are like coaches in radio affect you mentally early on the way it would affect a player?

CTG: No, in my mind they didn't know what the fuck they were talking about. I always know where I'm coming from. I'm never trying to be malicious. I honestly do and say what I feel in that moment.

SLAM: NBA players have big clutch and winning shots throughout their career. What are some of your biggest shots for you in radio?

CTG: Buffy The Body, when I was down in South Carolina. When I had T-Pain sing live on the air and told him he was terrible. With "The Breakfast Club," both



Kanye West interviews were big shots. Larry King was a big shot—me being on his show was a big shot.

SLAM: Were there analysts or reporters you liked watching in sports?

CTG: I used to love your father's [Peter Vecsey] commentary 'cause it was real than a mutha-fucker. He really loves the NBA

but doesn't give a fuck about the NBA's politics, he doesn't give a fuck about getting interviews or what people think about him, he's just being honest about his feelings, which is very refreshing. I did like Stuart Scott, God Bless the dead, because he was talking like us. He was using hip-hop slang, which I thought was dope. It made me feel like someone like me could be on TV.

SLAM: Are there any NBA players and rappers who need to hang it up?

CTG: I think Tim Duncan should have retired last year. Not because he's not still capable of producing, but go out on that high. You got five rings in a few different eras. Rap-wise, I think Ludacris should hang it up. Nelly should hang it up. You guys are very talented, you can do other things, but nobody is checking for their music. I'll sometimes hear someone come out with an album and I'm like, Why?—**JOSEPH VECSEY**

PICTURE ME BALLIN'



Mikh McKinney, Sacramento State: In his senior season with the Hornets, the 6-1 McKinney was a unanimous selection for the Big Sky Conference First-Team—his second consecutive year earning the honor. He won the MVP race, too—the first Sac State player to do so in nearly 40 years. So what is it about this Union City kid? His 19 ppg or 5 apg, both good for second in the conference? His 51.5 percent shooting from the field? His game-winning shot against North Dakota in January? That acrobatic layup versus Portland State? Duh—the answer is all of the above.

Shareta Brown, Wayne State University: Take a gander at this mighty fine stat line—22.5 points (on 64.3 percent shooting), 14.5 rebounds, 2.9 assists and 2.1 steals per game. Those are the kinds of fire numbers 6-1 center Brown dropped her senior year at Wayne State University. Her powerful play was grand enough to place her at the top of DII in rebounding and at No. 4 in scoring. Plus, she was voted the Great Lakes Intercollegiate Athletics Conference Player of the Year, only the second Wayne State Warrior to earn the honor. Clearly, her accolades are well-deserved.—**HABEEBA HUSAIN**



NOYZ

Seeing God Shammgod on the Providence bench as an assistant coach is dope.....Imagine if you could combine Steve Lavin's people skills with Kevin Willard's Xs-and-Os knowledge. THAT would be a good basketball coach. Instead, we have a very cool class of St. John's seniors finishing up without winning a single Big East Tournament game and Jaren Sina no longer at Seton Hall without any explanation given.....As if New York-area basketball fans don't suffer enough with the stupid Knicks and Nets.....

CHECK THA RESUME

Charlie Villanueva's windy career has taken him to Dallas, where he worked his way onto the team and now hopes to compete for an NBA Championship. *As told to Adam Figman*

When I came here to Dallas, I just felt right at home. It felt like a place that I belong, like I should be here, and I'm making the most of my opportunity.

I signed a non-guaranteed deal, a camp invite, and it went from a camp invite to eventually making the team. But the crazy thing is, they already had 15 players signed, so they basically paid somebody off so they could add me on the team. It's been a crazy process for me, from making the team and not being in the rotation to being in the rotation then not being in the rotation—it's been an up and down roller-coaster, and I've enjoyed every minute of it. The aspiration is going to the Playoffs and going far, so this is a very exciting process for me.

I'm a firm believer that everything happens for a reason. In Detroit, my expectations were

pretty high, and things just didn't work out. I felt like I was at the lowest point in my career. And now, nine years in and in my 10th season, not knowing where I'm gonna be—back in 2009 I signed on the first day of free agency, and then now, I signed a non-guaranteed not knowing what's going to happen, uncertain about my future. But I took it day by day and just kept working, kept grinding, and ended up making the team.

The Detroit experience helped me out a lot. We were a losing team, and it was just frustrating not being able to help. So I think being in Detroit helped me out so much, so when the uncertainties come up, I'm prepared for it. I've been professional, I've been working and only worried about the things I can control so when my name is called I can make the most out of the opportunity.



TIME OUT

As a team, we've got to get everybody healthy—that's first and foremost. We've got a team loaded with veterans and guys that have won Championships before and been around the NBA a long time. Plus we've got a group of guys that really care for one another, so we've just got to stick together and take it a game at a time. But this is a talented team that's deep. With adding Amar'e to the mix and picking up Rondo late, that's our strength: our depth. I think it's going to pay dividends for us in the Playoffs. One night it could

be Dirk, the next night it could be Richard Jefferson or myself—there are so many weapons, and I think we're gonna get it together and make a run.

Being where I started, it came from just a workout to a camp invite; from a camp invite to making the team; from making the team to being a rotational guy. To be a part of something special, that would mean the world to me. I got a championship in high school, got a championship in college. A Championship in the NBA would just be perfect. It would mean everything.

Ronald Martinez/Getty Images

Maybe if tourists didn't keep filling MSG at \$200 a pop, the team would be motivated to get better.....For the first time in the latter's Brooklyn history, their season will come down to a play in which Andray Blatche doesn't have the ball. You've already forgotten his clutch free throws in Chicago and overthrown pass in Toronto, haven't you?.....If you liked Gregor Fucka, you're gonna love Guilherme Crabogiale Fuck.....Yo, young fellas Dontae Christian, Jordan Green, Will Rayman and Chris Williams—how close are you reading??? Want a photo and all that? Ball out next year and we'll see what we can do....

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IN YOUR FACE

NO TELLIN'

D'ANGELO RUSSELL

Ohio State, 6-5, G

Phil Jackson isn't alone in his admiration of D'Angelo Russell.

The Knicks president, a front-office novice, was fined for commenting about the Ohio State freshman, who will have made a decision about whether to return to school or be a top-five pick in the 2015 Draft by the time you read this. However, as of press time, the 6-5 combo guard is coming off arguably the worst performance of his otherwise stellar campaign, shooting 3-19 in a season-ending Tourney loss to Arizona.

But don't think for a second that rough outing will affect how he's perceived in the eyes of NBA evaluators.

"I'm not sure his stock can get any higher than it is now," another NBA personnel man says after watching Russell in the game. "Some people put a lot of stock in the Tournament, but there's so many positives in his game that in his case, it doesn't matter."

"If you watched him play last spring, he wasn't one of those guys who stood out on the [HS] circuit," he explains, on the condition of anonymity, so as to avoid Jackson's fate. "But he set himself apart with the way he played this season, plus he's shooting the shit out of the ball. Is he an NBA 2 or point? The team he plays for will dictate what position he plays."

Russell's scoring instincts have evoked comparisons to fellow southpaw James Harden, while his handle and playmaking conjure notions of the Louisville native (via Florida prep powerhouse Montverde) developing into an oversized scoring PG. Either way, Russell, who averaged 19.3 ppg, 5.7 rpg, 5.0 apg and 1.6 spg for the year, shooting 44.9 percent from the field, 41.1 percent from three and 75.6 percent from the line, has joined the 2015 race as a potential No. 1 pick.

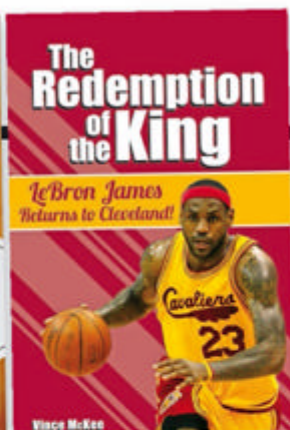
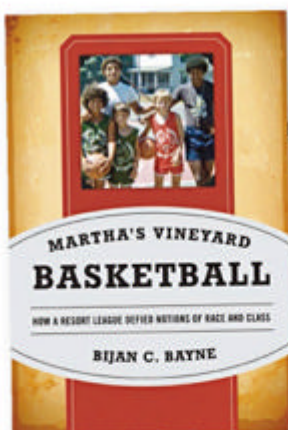
Whatever his role, wherever he's drafted, some Lottery team (maybe even the Knicks) will enjoy paying for—and talking about, freely—Russell's services in the near future.—**AGGREY SAM**



Kirk Irwin/Getty Images

NOYZ

The best kind of celebrity SLAM fans are the ones we don't even know we have. Like Fall Out Boy. Thanks for the exposure, fellas! And send us one of those classic tees if you have any left....The Stephon Marbury rebirth has been amazing to watch from a distance. We just wish we had a big-time travel budget so we could have been there in person for his latest chip....The only acceptable way to end that sucky Complex blog gallery post about how sneaker blog galleries suck



BOOKS

Martha's Vineyard may not be commonly regarded as a basketball mecca. But Bijan Bayne's new book *Martha's Vineyard Basketball: How a Resort League Defied the Notions of Race and Class* puts it on the map.

Basketball started on the Vineyard not long after James Naismith vacationed there, mere months before he invented the sport in Springfield in 1891. Long known as a summer refuge for the wealthy, the Oak Bluffs summer basketball league didn't begin until a year after the notorious Chappaquiddick incident when Senator Edward Kennedy drove his car off the Dike Bridge. Bigwigs like President

Obama, Dr. J and Ray Allen have all played at Niantic Park, but local legends like coach Jay Schofield and Johnny Rogers made it the heartbeat of the island. *Jaws* was shot on the island in 1974, and most of the minor roles were played by locals like Chris Rebello, a summer leaguer cast as Chief Brody's older son.

Bayne, a Vineyard lifer, never played in the league because his family usually arrived in August when the season was in full swing. The award-winning author incorporates recollections of his family with anecdotes and eyewitness impressions from other longtime residents. *Martha's Vineyard Basketball* is a homespun narrative of the storied lore of Massachusetts roundball that reinforces the notion that no man is an island. —**SHERMAN JOHNSON**

the O'Brien Trophy now more than ever.

McKee tells the story of how LeBron arrived at the second biggest decision of his life strictly by the numbers of when he was a prodigy and overstood he had more in common with Tiger Woods than just birthdays. The numbers he put up in his youth were so massive they crashed the matrix of the NCAA and triggered a ripple effect around the world. *The Redemption of the King* leaves no stone unturned in its inclusion of every clutch performance pivotal to Bron's development as a pound-for-pound behemoth. His annihilation of the Pistons in the fifth game of the Eastern Conference finals, when he scored 29 of the team's last 30, stands as a monumental testament in the appendices containing "LeBron's 10 Greatest Games of All Time."

In McKee's book LeBron's southern sojourn is likened to the college experience he never had, where he matured into a consummate teammate. That much is evident in the reprinted letter to his fans announcing his decision to return. His reasons reveal a presence of mind hitherto unexpressed and reveals where his focus resides now that he's on the back nine of his illustrious career. —**SJ**

would have been "And now, I quit."..... From the Emails That Write Themselves Department: "The Brooklyn at New York game will no longer be televised by NBA TV.".....Is it too late for the Bucks to rescind the Brandon Knight trade?.....We've grown pretty alright with Swaggy P's shtick, but if a dolphin has issues with you, just remember that dolphins are really, really smart. We don't see Flipper getting all up in Kevin Durant's shit.....Herb Sendek will be back, and a school will be lucky to have him.....We already miss the llamas. Can't a new set escape, like, once a week, just to keep the internet on its toes?.....

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IN YOUR FACE

HUSTLE HARDER

KYLE O'QUINN

Orlando Magic, 6-10, F

According to a study published in 2014, of the 180 second-round NBA Draft picks selected between 2004 and 2009, only 55 had gone on to play over 1,750 minutes over their entire careers. That's barely 30 percent.

Kyle O'Quinn, the 49th pick of the 2012 Draft who's currently in his third season in the League, has blown past that number.

For the Queens native, defeating the odds isn't unfamiliar territory; numbers have never been in his favor.

While surviving as a second-rounder may seem like a daunting task, and rightfully so considering that the average NBA career length of second-round picks between 2004 and 2008 was 2.9 years, the chances of the 6-10 power forward playing DI basketball seemed even bleaker.

"Norfolk State was the first and only school to ever talk about a scholarship," says O'Quinn, who led the Spartans to an upset over No. 2 seed Missouri in the first round of the 2012 NCAA Tournament. "The odds were against me. I think I beat the odds to some extent. But I want to continue to grow and beat the odds a little more."

As a rookie, O'Quinn earned the Hustle Player of the Year award. Last season, he led the Magic in blocks with 1.3 per night, while also chipping in 6.2 points and 5.3 rebounds; he's posting similar numbers this season.

There was a stretch earlier this campaign where his full potential really began to show. With Nikola Vucevic out in December, the former MEAC POY filled in the starting slot, averaging 12.8 points and 5.7 rebounds during the six game stretch—including a 21-point, 11-rebound performance against the Warriors.

"Control what you can control," says O'Quinn of the advice he gives HS players in a situation similar to his. "You have to stay prepared. Because when the opportunity comes, which it does come to everyone, you don't want to miss it." —FRANKLYN CALLE



Layne Murdoch/NBAE via Getty Images

NOYZ

Shout out to the homie Chris Manhertz for turning a college basketball career at Canisius into a pro football career with the Buffalo Bills. Catch, block and don't get hurt?.....Iona coach Tim Cluess is cool.....March Madness is not the same without Spiro running the SLAM office pool. Figs did his best, though.....For those of you enjoying Russell Westbrook's recent historical run, a few of us will remember a wild night in Newark that, in retrospect, felt like a prelude.....Marshall Henderson and Homicide sharing an experience. We like.....



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LOUDER THAN A BOMB Always by Dave Zirin

OPEN LETTER TO NYC

Anthony Mason embodied the Big Apple in a way that few—if any—Knicks players ever have.

To describe the late Anthony Mason as a “former NBA player” does not begin to capture the ways in which he left his imprint on the game, the collective hoops consciousness, or our individual imaginations. On December 22, 1995, I returned home from a year as a student in South America in a state of crazy culture shock. I was leaving an area in the heart of its summer where fruit was so ripe it would fall to pieces in your palm and returned home to New York City: cold, wet, dirty, 1995 New York City, where it officially got dark at 4:30 p.m., but where the shadows worked around the clock. No hipsters. No Taylor Swift. Just New York City.

To ease the transition, a friend of the family scored me two prime tickets to watch the Knicks play a new expansion team named after a Spielberg movie, the Toronto Raptors.

I hadn’t been able to pay attention to hoops while gone in those pre-internet days and was stunned to learn Knicks coach Pat Riley had faxed in his resignation and hightailed it to Miami. Now, for reasons that remain incomprehensible, my team hired as their new coach the League’s mad scientist of run-and-gun, Don Nelson. The lunch pail, beat-your-ass, Ewing, Oakley, Starks, grind-it-out Knicks hired the guy who turned Manute Bol into a three-point shooting weapon. I asked my buddy Arya how in the hell would the architect of the Golden State Warriors’ Run-TMC put his “Nellie stamp” on this blue-collar collection of sharp elbows and head butts? Arya smiled and said

four words: “Mase is running point.” My eyes widened to anime dimensions. Anthony Mason, Riley’s barrel chested off-the-bench power-forward enforcer, the guy who could make Charles Oakley look subtle, was running point. Yes, there had been moments when he could show a shockingly sweet handle and deft ability to lead a fast break, but this seemed like Nelson had been drinking LSD-laced Kool Aid.

But that is exactly what Nelson had set up. Mase was guarded that night by a Raptors rookie named Damon Stoudamire who was on the path to Rookie of the Year honors—not to mention 5-9 on tip-toes. That night, I saw my first ever power-point-forward, a position that LeBron has since turned into sculpted, fine art, but then was the shock of the new. I will never forget Stoudamire trying to navigate himself around Mase’s thighs

to even try and swipe at the ball. Mase dominated, and that season, the former reserve who did not even make the League until he was 23 and had played across the globe, led the NBA in minutes while averaging 15 points, over 9 boards and 4.5 assists per game.

Like many a great artist, neither Don Nelson nor Anthony Mason were appreciated in their time, and others have reaped the benefits of their flouting of conventions. Yet while Nelson is barely a footnote in Knicks history, Mason still looms incredibly large, especially for a player who was in New York for only five seasons. The outpouring following his death was stunning, as teammates, media members and fans shared memories that acted on social media like it was a 96-hour wake. Yes, it’s cliché, but the root of the melancholy was seeing a person who played with so much heart dying way

too young at age 48 from a massive heart attack. It was also the fact that Mason, more than any other Knick of the last quarter century, embodied New York City. He was tough as hell and brilliantly creative. He’d either dazzle you with a crossover followed by a look-away pass, or he’d knock you the hell out. Either ending was a distinct possibility every single time down the court. It drove Pat Riley crazy, it drove Don Nelson to ecstasy and it drove the fans of 1995 in pre-gentrification New York City to see themselves reflected in his persona.

After that game against the Raptors, I extended my hand and Mase reached over to give me a pound. He was larger than life, but never wanted to stand apart. For me, for the fans, for the city, he was the people’s superstar at that last moment in time when the stars of New York were still within arm’s length. Rest in peace.



Brad Mangin/NBAE via Getty Images

NOYZ

If you went to jury duty a few days after LeBron left Cleveland for MIA and had lunch with a fellow juror whose last name is/was LeBron, congrats, you're probably Jake Appleman....Speaking of Señor Appleman, if you thought NOYZ was a little better than normal this month, well, thank him. If you didn't, blame Ed....Get well soon Harvey Pollack!! (h/t Peter Vecsey)....Much respect to the girls' team at Harbor City (CA) Narbonne....Jack Haley....Anthony Mason....Mike Neufeldt....Christian Welp....Rasheem King....

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SPRING FORWARD

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SLAM **ADAMONTH**

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RYSHEED JORDAN
ON DYLAN ENNIS

Spoiler alert: St. John's would wind up losing this game by 38 points, their worst loss since 2002. They would then lose to Providence in the first round of the Big East Tournament, and to San Diego State in the first (fine,

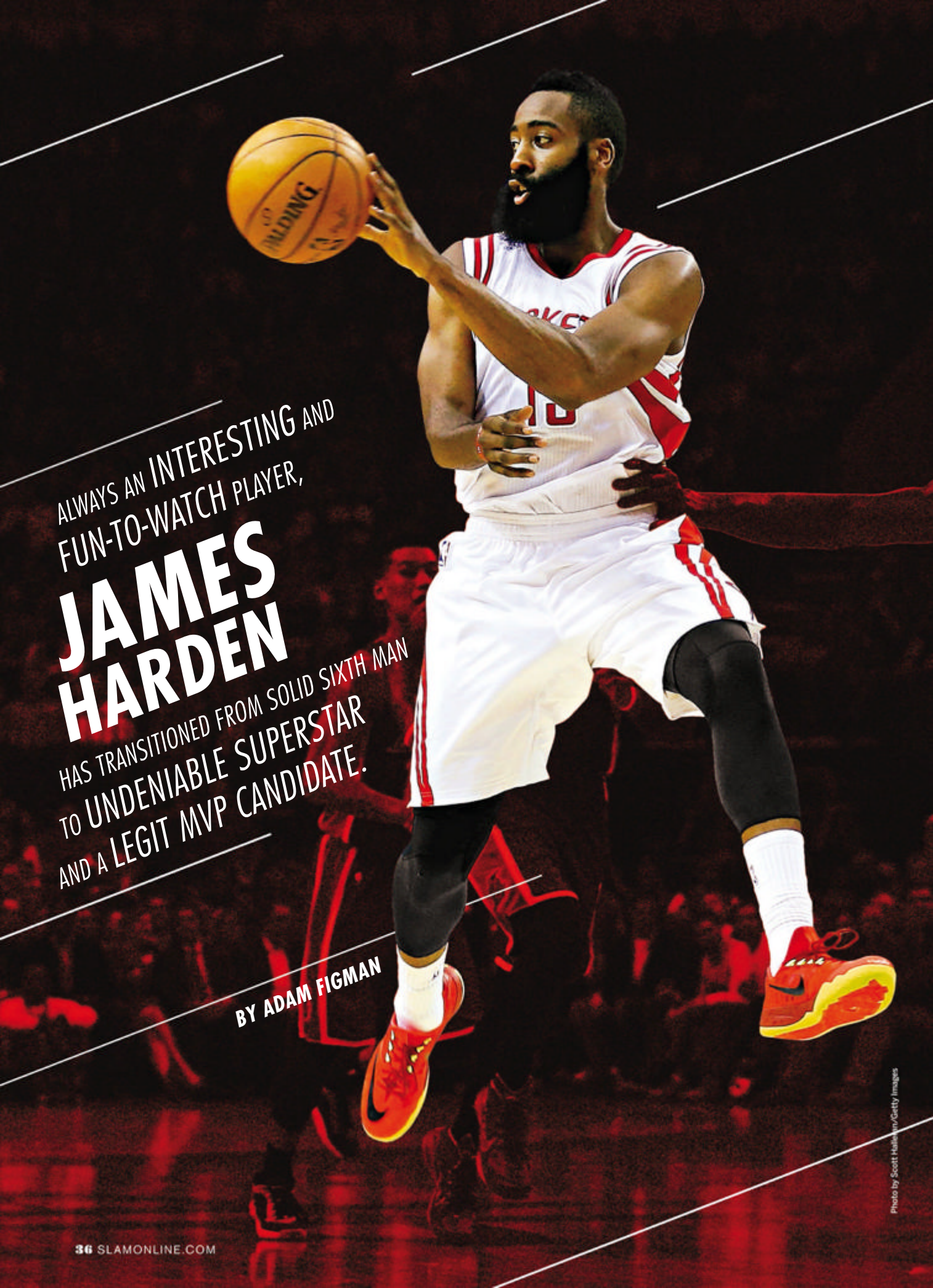
second) round of the NCAA Tournament, both by double digits. This after winning eight of their previous 10, including four straight. But that all came later.

Rysheed Jordan was in his home-

town of Philadelphia, his St. John's squad was up 8 early, and as he split the double team up top the lane was briefly, tantalizingly open. It didn't stay that way, but by then it was too late. As Villanova junior guard Dylan Ennis

(brother of the Bucks' Tyler Ennis) popped out to draw the charge, Jordan had already taken two dribbles down the lane and elevated like his name- and number-sake. It was, as they say, Jordanesque.

Was it a charge? Maybe. Ennis seemed to be out of the circle, and his feet appeared to be set. But seeing that it was St. John's final great moment of the year, it's nice that they got the benefit of the doubt. —**HUSS BENGTSON**



ALWAYS AN INTERESTING AND
FUN-TO-WATCH PLAYER,

JAMES HARDEN

HAS TRANSITIONED FROM SOLID SIXTH MAN
TO UNDENIABLE SUPERSTAR
AND A LEGIT MVP CANDIDATE.

BY ADAM FIGMAN

2015
Playoffs



Upper Echelon

There was a minute and change left in a March Rockets-Pacers game when James Harden felt the ball in his hands, his team holding on to a comfortable, if slightly unreliable, 7-point lead. Harden was guarded at the top of the key by Pacers guard George Hill, and only Pacers guard George Hill, which meant it was time to go to work. The 25-year-old dribbled strong to the left, then spun hard toward the paint, then, with the shot

level, it encapsulated Harden's evolution into full-fledged superstar—from decent role player to steady sixth man to bona fide All-Star to his ongoing status as legitimate MVP candidate—the guy who undoubtedly gets the ball when the pressure is turned up the highest.

And, of course, the move Harden put on Hill was downright filthy, as so many of the lefty guard's moves have been this season. He then ran down

step of that aforementioned evolution. NBA ballers progress from good to great all the time, but to go from great to incredible, arguably the *best*, requires a unique form of motivation.

"Within the first 10 games of the year, you could see how much he was doing for our offense," says Rocket assistant Chris Grant. "It was just across the board, from creating shots to creating pace to scoring itself. Early in the season, the new ap-

super-high figure, but a solid one considering how much of the Rockets' offense he's controlling, as he's leading not only the team but the entire League in field goals attempted and total minutes played.

And as could be expected of the star of a Daryl Morey-assembled squad, the more advanced the stats get, the more impressive Harden's numbers prove themselves to be. He's first in the NBA in Win Shares—a stat

"HE WORKED, AND HE WORKED HARD, AND IT ALL CAME TOGETHER FOR HIM."

—SCOTT PERA

clock winding down and Hill still draped all over him, he took a quick jump-step back, floated up into the air and sank a fade-away jumper that gave him his 40th and 41st points and his team a game-sealing 9-point lead.

That one play was a microcosm of so much. Houston relied on Harden to put the team on his shoulders and bring them home, just as they have over the course of the entire season, over and over again. On an individual

the court and busted out his now-signature "stirring the pot" celebration, adding yet another victim to the ever-growing "I've been cooked by James Harden" list.

The length of that list isn't too surprising—Harden's proven capable of embarrassing the man in front of him for years now, be it in NBA action or summertime Drew League games—but more notable is his overall growth, perhaps the final

proach, and then the willingness to just be such a big part of our offense, other than just scoring, just kind of clicked."

On that end of the court, here's how good he's been: His scoring is up to 27.2 points per game, second in the NBA behind only Russell Westbrook, another MVP candidate, as we went to press. He's dropped 50 once and 45 twice. He's sinking a career-high 2.5 threes per, while hitting 43.9 of his total shots—not a

that measures how many wins a player produces for his team—with 13.9, right ahead of names like Stephen Curry, Chris Paul and Anthony Davis.

Harden plays basketball in a manner that must make Morey downright giddy. His entire game revolves around three-pointers and drives to the hoop; he's efficient in all of the ways today's wave of analytics-praising NBA executives could imagine.

"His game isn't dominated



by the thought of, 'I have to shoot or score,'" says Herb Sendek, who coached Harden at Arizona State. "He just tries to make the right play. If he's covered one-on-one or he's open, he'll score. The minute the defense commits a second defender, boom, the ball is in a teammate's hands. He doesn't force the issue."

He's also attempting more free throws than any other NBA player (10.1 per game as we went to press), which, harkening back to the all-efficiency-everything nature of Harden's style of play, makes perfect sense. As we write this, Harden's had two games with at least 20 made freebies in the past five days—nobody in the NBA has done it once this season. If he does it once more before the regular season lets out, he'll be the third player to toss in 20 free throws in a game three times during a season in the past 50 years, joining a list containing only Jerry West and Kobe Bryant.

The specific way he's creating those free throws is more fascinating than the insane volume of them he's earning. While he's maneuvering toward the basket, Harden extends the ball out in front of him, the opposite of what you might teach a youngster learning the game. But the California native is capable of baiting his man just enough and then drawing the foul, frustrating even the most poised defenders. "Only guy I can remember who's probably harder to officiate since I've been in the NBA has probably been Shaq," Pacers forward David West told the *Indy Star* after that late March bout, in which Harden attempted 22 free throws. "I don't know if there's been a guy who's been able to draw the type of fouls that he does."

"He had that before he got [to Houston], that's not something we've helped him with," Grant says. "He has unbelievable strength and balance. James is a handful because he creates so much contact on the attack—he's always pushing the envelope with regards to contact, so he's a hard guy to officiate. He has the ability to stay strong, leave the ball out there, hardly ever get stripped, and players often lack discipline and will put him on the line."

The reality of the matter is that all of those free throws don't necessarily conjure up the same crowd excitement as, say, one of Stephen Curry's impossibly quick transition

three-pointers or one of Russell Westbrook's monster dunks. When he's really rolling, Harden has his opposition at his mercy, and if he's not drawing a double team and moving the ball in the right direction—which he does plenty of, as evidenced by his 7.0 assists per tilt—he'll gladly take advantage by sliding past his opponent and then luring either his man or the help defense (or both) into the inevitable foul call.

If we're being honest, it's a style of play that isn't always particularly fun to watch—and even less so to defend, naturally—but the results are indisputable. Sure, it's unfortunate his skills don't result in the kind of jump-off-the-couch reactions other stars more frequently provide, but how can you argue with the endgame? The second-highest scorer in the NBA and the only true playmaker on the Rockets' roster, Harden is averaging less shots per game than Westbrook, Kobe, Carmelo Anthony, LaMarcus Aldridge and LeBron James.

"That's why I get upset when he takes 20, 25 shots, because that's not him," says Scott Pera, who coached Harden at Artesia High School in Lakewood, CA. "He's best when he's shooting 15-17 shots, getting to the line 10 times, making 4 threes, and getting his 30 that way. He's done it a million times, obviously. But as his coach I'm always looking at the shot attempts."

At Artesia, Pera helped mold Harden from a just-decent freshman ("He was just a kid who could shoot," Pera says) into a McDonald's All-American, though he still wasn't recruited in the way some of the bigger names were. He ended up following Pera to Arizona State after Pera accepted an assistant coaching job there—Pera now coaches at Rice University in Houston, which helps him stay in close contact with Harden—then played two seasons for Herb Sendek, averaging 17.8 points per game as a freshman and 20.1 as a sophomore.

In 2009 Harden was selected third overall by Oklahoma City, where he developed into the League's best Sixth Man; then in 2012, after being unable to come to terms on an extension with OKC, he was traded to Houston, accepting an extension to make deserved superstar money and receive deserved superstar attention in Texas.

The "small" markets of OKC and Houston haven't shielded





Harden from his fair share of criticism—no small amount of Internet space has been devoted to videos detailing his defensive lapses, though that too is an area where Harden has improved over the past year.

"I think he made the mature step of saying, OK, I've got to be able to do it all, because that's what Jordan did, that's what Duncan does," Grant says. "The

on offense."

That last point can't be emphasized enough. Dwight Howard, the Rockets' supposed star big man, has played just 32 games this season as we went to press, and last summer the Rockets lost Chandler Parsons and Jeremy Lin—guys who, in a pinch, could at least create their own shots—to free agency and a trade. The current Rockets'

told reporters after a recent win. He's neck and neck with Curry, Westbrook and LeBron for 2014-15's MVP award, which is to say that regardless of how the season ends, this was the year James Harden made The Leap, or at least A Leap—the one that propels a guy into the uppermost echelon of NBA stars.

"He worked, and he worked hard, and it all came together for

May—and perhaps even later than that.

"My biggest message to him has been preparing him for what he's gonna see in the Playoffs," Grant says. "We see glimpses of it during the season, how different teams guard him, what trends come up when they're trying to stop him. Certain teams have success and other teams are going to try and copy that.

HARDEN'S IS A STYLE OF PLAY THAT ISN'T ALWAYS PARTICULARLY FUN TO WATCH —AND EVEN LESS SO TO DEFEND— BUT THE RESULTS ARE INDISPUTABLE.

guys that win at the highest level, they play both sides of the ball at the highest level. Before, there's always been a big burden on him to score and carry the offense, and I think he felt, I need to kind of conserve energy on the defensive side of the floor. Coming into this season, I think he's changed that paradigm. He's learning to pick his spots and rest on offense a little more—while still creating pace and movement and other things that are really valuable—even though he's probably carrying even more of a load

roster is by no means awful, but those playmaker-types were never replaced.

No matter—Harden has kept Houston afloat, and then some. They're 47-23 as of this writing, and they're most successful as a unit when Harden himself is doing his thing, amassing a 15-1 record in games that he scores 35 points or more and a 6-11 record when he falls short of 20.

"I think when I'm aggressive and in attack mode, it opens everything else up for my teammates as well," Harden

him," Pera says.

Back to that March game against Indiana, though. And see, that's the thing: It happened in late March. Harden has proven he has the ability to carry the Rockets through the regular season, helping a team that was largely expected to take a step back this year do the exact opposite and become a legitimate contender, a group in position to compete for an NBA Championship over the coming month-plus. But the biggest test will come in late April and early

My message has been, Are you Playoff-ready? I think he's got the ability to pretty much beat his guy almost any time, but we just want him to be able to make quicker decisions, play off the catch more, take what's there. He's so super-talented that sometimes he'll make things a little harder than they have to be, but because he's so good he ends up making it look easy. Over the course of a Playoff game or Playoff series, it gets harder and harder to replicate."

Time for another leap. **\$**

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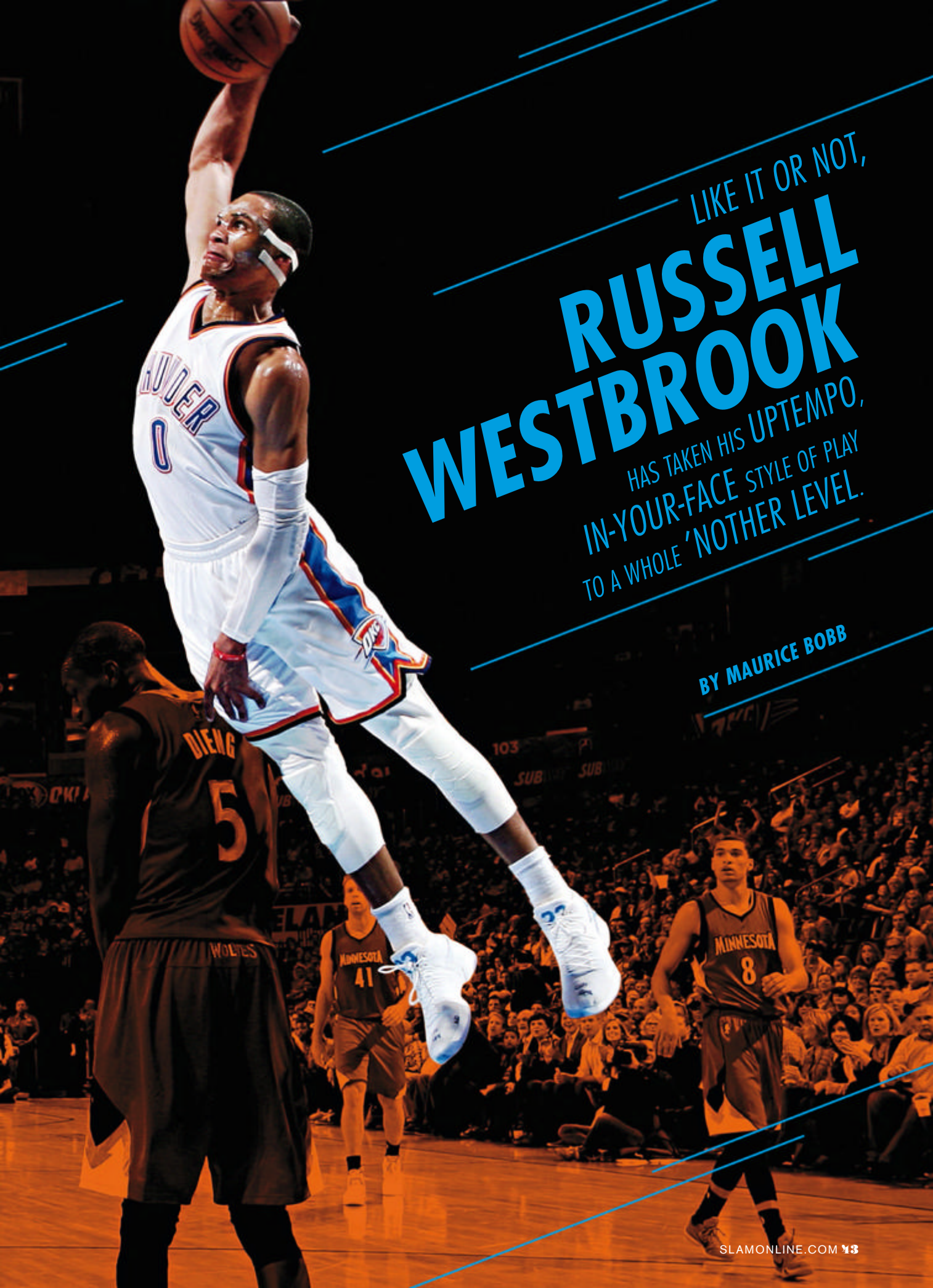
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RUSSELL WESTBROOK

HAS TAKEN HIS UPTempo,
IN-YOUR-FACE STYLE OF PLAY
TO A WHOLE 'NOTHER LEVEL.

BY MAURICE BOBB

When it comes to the Indefatigable Russell Westbrook, whose very existence defies the laws of physics and any form of conventional basketball wisdom, we might take a moment and consider Schrödinger's cat.

As Big Bang Theory fanatics are aware, Schrödinger's cat is the famous experiment proposed by Erwin Schrödinger in 1935 to illustrate the apparent conflict inherent in the Copenhagen interpretation of quantum physics applied to everyday objects. To demonstrate, Schrödinger placed a living cat in a steel box with a sealed vial of hydrocyanic acid that could break open at any random time, thus killing the

columns written about him are to be believed.

Playing in the enormous shadow cast by reigning League MVP Kevin Durant, he's been vilified for not deferring enough, roasted for not accepting the role as the team's second fiddle and thrown under the bus for every non-pass, for every chaotic play and for every ill-advised shot he took that Durant should have taken. We placed him in a box, near a vial of frustration and contempt; labeled him both erratic and focused fury and we're lazy enough in our assessments to leave him there, in non-transcendent purgatory.

Even now, on a wispy Monday evening in March, a scrum

to get wins," says Westbrook. "Obviously Serge going down [hurts because he's a] big part of our team offensively and defensively, but we just gotta find a way to get it together and keep it going."

Further proof of Westbrook's cavalier demeanor is this: before he readies his mask (and cape?), he reaches over towards Durant, who is invoking media silence while sitting at the adjacent locker eating from a chicken finger basket, to take a French fry and then dips it in his limited portion of sauce.

"Don't be dipping in my sauce," says Durant, kiddingly chastising the man who, according to his MVP acceptance

Westbrook, whose MVP-caliber play had earned him a wave of positive press. All it took, it seems, was for him to kick open that fucking box he was put in so the rest of us couldn't help but see that he wasn't good or bad, he was freaking spectacular and, as Nas would say, half-man, half-amazing.

"I think maybe you guys are saying nice things about him, so when you say nice things about people, they tend to like you more," says head coach Scott Brooks. "He's been playing good for a lot of years. I've been saying that since he was a rookie leading a young team with 15 points, 5 rebounds and 5 assists. I keep going back to that.

"AS A COACH—I CAN SPEAK FOR THE OTHER 29 COACHES—YOU LIKE PLAYERS THAT LEAVE EVERYTHING ON THE FLOOR, AND THAT'S WHAT RUSSELL DOES."

—BROOKS

cat. Since the observer cannot know when or if the vial has been broken until the box is opened, the cat can be thought of as both alive and dead.

Just like Schrödinger's cat, the 6-3, 200-pound point guard's six-year tenure as a cornerstone player for the Oklahoma City Thunder, according to rebuffed OKC fans, NBA analysts, the media and the public-at-large, has been both good and bad. Mercurial, volatile and wondrously unpredictable, Westbrook has been both a gift and a curse, if

of reporters circled around Hustle Russell's locker at Dallas' American Airlines Center don't know quite what to make of him as he fields questions an hour before tip-off against the surging Mavericks. He is congenial, personable and, despite the fact that rabid rim protector Serge Ibaka and his superstar teammate Durant are out with injuries, he is not worried in the least about his chances against Dirk Nowitzki & Co.

"Just come out and play like I've been doing, try to find a way

speech, would run through a wall for him.

On cue, the reporters remind the four-time scoring champion that dipping once is allowed, it's double dipping that's considered flagrant. This elicits a laugh from Westbrook, he who only two months prior answered every post-game question with the Marshawn Lynch-esque phrase, "good job of execution," and flat out told Berry Tramel, a reporter for *The Oklahoman*, "I just don't like you."

It was a kinder, gentler

Not a lot of guys could do that and he never played the point in college. He's done a good job."

Good just wasn't good enough against the Mavs on this night, though. Without Ibaka clogging up the middle, bounding up and down to swat shots as if on a pogo stick, Chandler Parsons stepped up to catch wreck, scoring a game-high 31 points. Add to that Rajon Rondo's 13 dimes and Dallas had just enough offensive firepower to rally back from 15 down in the third quarter to notch a 119-115



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"I'M JUST TRYING TO **KEEP THINGS TOGETHER** *AND GET WINS."*

victory and a move up to fifth place in the Western Conference Playoffs race.

Westbrook, who came into the game averaging a triple-double (34.4 ppg, 11.3 rpg and 10.1 apg) over the span of his previous nine games, handled his business, keeping his team within striking distance with 24 points, 8 rebounds, 12 assists and 4 steals, but after fouling out with 59.3 seconds left in the game, it was a wrap for the Thunder, who are fighting for their post-season lives for the eighth seed.

"The Western Conference has always been deep—every year teams make moves to constantly get better and better to improve their team," says Westbrook.

Prior to the game, Coach Brooks was asked if he pulled Westbrook to the side and asked him to do more for the team to pick up the slack in Ibaka's absence.

"Not more, I mean I don't know if he can do more. It'd be unfair for the coach to ask for that, right?" says Brooks. "He's playing great, he's been leading us for a lot of years and I'm glad that he's getting some good positive press, but he leaves everything on the floor. As a coach—I can speak for the other 29 coaches—you like players that leave everything on the floor and that's what Russell does. He's done a great job of leading us and with Serge out, we have to play a little different but my job is to figure it out and we have to do that quickly and on the fly."

On the fly. No three words better describe Westbrook's ascension into greatness since winning the NBA All-Star Game MVP in New York. He became the masked Avenger, hoisting his team on his muscled

shoulders, defiantly knocking the wind out of opponents with his increasingly deadly stop-and-pop jumper, stat-stuffing rebounds and assists and those game-changing violent dunks that tattoo the rim with the force of a battering ram. Not even a fractured right cheek could stop the reign.

Just four days after undergoing surgery, Westbrook took the Chesapeake Arena court against the Philadelphia 76ers and scored a career-high 49 points, plus 16 rebounds and 10 assists in OKC's 123-118 overtime win.

Russ attacked the seams of the defense, rose like a jet engine for jump shots, made passes that would make Magic Johnson make a screw face in astonishment and engineered multiple one-man fast breaks, including an earth-shattering two-handed sledgehammer dunk in the first quarter.

"Instead of taking off on one foot, I do two-foot finishes not worrying about the foul," says Westbrook, about how he fights through hard fouls. "I know when I miss, I'm worrying about the foul, so you take the contact and keep going."

With that eye-popping performance, Westbrook became the first player since Michael Jordan to post four consecutive triple dubs. He's singlehandedly keeping the Thunder in the Playoff hunt, prompting analysts to consider him a serious contender for league MVP. But does Mr. #WhyNot think about his candidacy?

"I have no take on it," says Westbrook. "My job is to come out and play at a high level every single night and that's what I've been doing. Honestly, it don't really matter to me."

If Westbrook actually took

home the Maurice Podoloff Trophy, it would be the first time ever that the trophy was passed from one teammate to another. That said, has Durant given him any advice on how to take home the hardware?

"No, he hasn't," says Westbrook flatly.

For all the talk about No. 0's current penchant for torching the L in literally every category on the stat sheet, we are witnessing a true paradigm shift. Westbrook has asserted himself so completely as OKC's de facto leader that there is legitimate talk about the team needing to deal Durant. After totally screwing the pooch by trading James Harden, sending away the second best player in the Association would be a cataclysmic bonehead move by the Thunder front office. So don't hold your breath on that one.

But just the fact that it was even spoken out loud tells you how far Westbrook has come since February 15, when he dropped 41—one point shy of Wilt Chamberlain's all-time All-Star Game record of 42 points set back in 1962—to best LeBron James' East squad for the 163-158 win.

Surprisingly, after witnessing the onslaught of basketball stanchion-shaking dunks and three-pointers firsthand, it was King James who best described Westbrook as a player, because unlike most of us, he didn't have to bother with Schrödinger's cat to figure it out.

"Be Russell Westbrook," James told CBS Sports when asked what advice he'd give Westbrook. "Stop caring about what everybody else thinks. So he don't have to change. Just be yourself. That's all. That's all that matters. Russell Westbrook is one of the best talents, most

gifted talents this game has ever seen. He goes out every night and proves that. He shows it. I don't need to tell him anything.

"He's an unbelievable talent in our league," James added. "His motor, his athleticism, his demeanor about how he approaches the game, it's all great. And it's great for our league. He showed that tonight, showcased it on a big stage."

Not since Michael Jordan channeled Oscar Robertson in 1989 with his all-around play (seven straight triple-doubles, for those keeping count), has there been a player on a tear like Westbrook. He's still as vicious a force of nature as ever, but he plays within himself, he exercises poise and patience. Instead of blowing up everything in his vicinity like trinitrotoluene, he explodes in controlled blasts, utilizing his "can't stop, won't stop" engine when he sees the slightest opening. Making defenses crumble and collapse at will.

They say that when you're truly great, you don't have to toot your own horn, that everyone else will do that for you. In the curious case of Russell Westbrook, who is no longer maligned as selfish or self-serving, any and every analyst, pundit and critic (and Allen Iverson, who's a huge fan) with a platform is lauding the four-time All-Star for his incredible run. He's playing the best basketball of his life right now. But getting him to agree with that fact is an entirely different quantum physics problem in itself.

"I don't know," says Westbrook, when asked if he can play better than he is right now. "I take one day at a time, man, and constantly keep doing what I'm doing. That's it." **\$**



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CURRY**

AND

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THOMPSON**

NOW HAVE THE SAME GOAL IN MIND
— A TITLE.

BY AGGREY SAM

Say what you want about Mark Jackson, but the former Golden State Warriors' coach's 2013 assertion that Steph Curry and Klay Thompson were "the greatest shooting backcourt tandem in the history of the game" sounds a lot less debatable today. In fact, it can now be argued that he didn't go far enough in touting the duo's potential, stars of the NBA's top regular-season team.

Of course, it's not just Thompson and Curry that have made the Dubs, owners of the best record in the L, so formidable. The team's chemistry, balance, unselfishness and style of play are a thing of beauty, as they routinely make life miserable for visitors to raucous Oracle Arena. On the road, their games feel like the Globetrotters are in town for an exhibition affair.

But without minimizing the contributions of others—former All-Stars Andre Iguodala and David Lee sacrificing by coming off the bench for emerging youngsters Harrison Barnes and Draymond Green, center Andrew Bogut quietly functioning as the squad's hub on both ends of the floor, underrated backups like Mo Speights, Shaun Livingston and Leandro Barbosa forming the second unit, a first-year head coach building on the foundation created by the departed Jackson—it's obvious that the aptly-named

"Splash Brothers" (coined by Warriors' employee Brian Witt) are the major reasons GS has risen to new heights, including the franchise's first Pacific Division title since 1976, behind one of the most cohesive backcourts since Frazier and Monroe, Thomas and Dumars and anyone else you can think of.

While Curry's blend of flashy ballhandling, playmaking and long-distance shooting, and Thompson's size for his position, defensive potential and similarly accurate outside marksman-

but I think this summer was particularly important," explains Ron Adams, a Warriors assistant who's regarded around the NBA as one of its foremost defensive minds. "I think, though, they're more reflective of our team in general. Yes, they have great chemistry, but so does the team.

"You have your two best players on the team, who everyone likes and everyone roots for, and they're the right kind of people, so I know in that way, it's affected it. But conversely, I think the total team ethos has helped

perhaps borne out of the humility that comes from being the sons of former pros. But unlike the notoriously reticent Thompson, Curry, the leading All-Star vote-getter, has a more outgoing demeanor and his fan-friendly game, relatively average 6-3 (listed) size, personable branding and baby-faced appearance belie his competitive nature and a career spent trying to prove doubters wrong.

"It depends on who you're talking about. People who knew me believed in me a lot. That's

legitimate NBA star. "[There wasn't] any doubt, but just how real the moment was just kinda built up every single year. You obviously have a dream and work every year, but at a certain point, which was my freshman year, that kinda transitioned into it being real and it was a decision, per se—I didn't think I made a quick one, to leave school—but at that point, you realize you're right on the brink of realizing a dream and that motivates you more. So, I never doubted or never sold myself short on that dream, but

"STEPH DOESN'T SAY MUCH. HE LEADS BY EXAMPLE. THE GUYS, THEY ABSOLUTELY FOLLOW HIM. COME TO WORK EVERY DAY, SHOW 'EM HOW IT'S DONE."

—KERR

ship have been evident for some time now, the seeds of the two All-Star Game starters' improvement and thusly, Golden State's rise, may have been sown last summer during their Gold-medal-winning USA Basketball tour at the FIBA World Cup.

"They have great respect for each other, they're very different people. I think they bonded well this summer. This past summer was very important for them. Not to say they hadn't before,

them," continues Adams, who actually coached Curry's sweet-shooting father, Dell, and against Thompson's father, Mychal, a former No. 1 overall Draft pick. "If they make a mistake or they take a bad shot, nobody's hanging their head. Very unusual team in that regard. They just support and they believe in those two guys and those guys believe in the rest of their teammates."

Thompson and Curry both possess low-key personalities,

family, coaches, teammates, ever since middle school. They always saw something in me and wanted me to keep going. But when it comes to people assessing my game from the outside, I definitely had more belief than the majority of the people and that's what fuels me to keep going," says Curry, concisely summing up his thought process during his journey from lightly recruited prep prospect to Tournament darling at Davidson and finally,

after playing in the Tournament as a freshman, that's when I started to visualize what it would take to make that jump."

That mentality has led to the most overlooked aspect of Curry's growth as a player, his much-maligned defense. Sure, his usual gaudy offensive stats (23.4 points and 7.9 assists per, 47.9, 42.2 and a League-leading 91.4 percent from the field, three-point line and charity stripe, respectively) are still



intact, but he's also averaging 2.1 steals per game, best in the NBA. Beyond that, Curry, while he's no Gary Payton, is somewhat similar to his team, which ranks at or near the top in most defensive categories, as he fares much better on that end of the floor than expected, partly due to Kerr deploying him against the League's best point guards, a task previously handed to Thompson most of the time.

"Part of it has to be getting older, maturing, knowing what it takes. I think that's a big part of it, so with the really good players in the League and when they're young, I don't think you can ever discount that, because each year there's more experience. Their vistas widen. Steph has taken it upon himself to be a better defender this year, which he's become, and I think that has helped the pundits'—for lack of a better word—their view on him as a total player," says Adams. "He's playing both sides of the ball and I think he can only get better, certainly in the defensive area. He's a super attitude guy to begin with, but I think the environment Steve has created has been good for him and also it's allowed him to grow. I'm just kinda speculating, but I know there are some factual things that have happened. And I think lastly, he knows how much work it takes to be good at this level, and he puts it in."

Chimes in Kerr, who also suffered (or benefited) from a boy-next-door complex that muffled his talent as a Championship-winning player with the Bulls and a young Tim Duncan in San Antonio: "Steph doesn't say much. He leads by example. The guys, they absolutely follow him. But he's more in the Tim Duncan mold. Come to work every day, show 'em how it's done, but doesn't have to say much."

Thompson, as noted, has even less to say than Curry, who is at least more outwardly flamboyant on the court. Defense wasn't seen as a hole in his game, but like Curry, playing for the national team under the watchful eye of USA assistant Tom Thibodeau, he was also challenged to ramp up his intensity. The 6-7 sharpshooter clamped down on opposing international wing scorers, backing up his agent Bill Duffy's assertion that

he was the "best two-way shooting guard" in the game. Golden State seemed to agree, giving him a max extension prior to the season, but there was an added bonus, as Thompson's development also included diversifying his offensive game. Instead of simply being content with the label of elite spot-up shooter, the Washington State product shed his frustrating bouts of unassertiveness to become an aggressive slasher, utilize his better-than-advertised athleticism to finish more effectively at the rim and even function as a secondary ballhandler and playmaker, resulting in career-high numbers.

"I want to be a complete player and out there, I'm not trying to press. I'm trying to let the game come to me and that comes with having great shot selection, being patient and if I do that, I can be a really great player in this league," explains Thompson, who was averaging over 21 ppg and nearly 3 apg, while putting up percentages of 46.2 from the field, 43 from three and 88 from the line at press time. "I think it comes with natural progression in this league and learning new things and being more comfortable out there. It's my fourth year and I'm just trying to grow every game."

Adds the professorial Adams: "Well, I think Klay is a little bit of a late bloomer. He's a young player but just coming into his own. So, I think the confidence aspect has played a big part in his growth this year, and I think the summer [which Thompson spent playing alongside Curry on the Gold medal-winning USA Basketball team at the FIBA World Cup] was very important to him in again, solidifying—to him—that he belonged amongst the high-level players in the League.

"He plays both sides of the ball, and for a 2-guard, he's very good on the ball. He does a lot of other good stuff, too. But his defensive game, too, has a lot of growth in it, so that's exciting. If he sets his mind to it, I think he can be one of the best, if not the best, rebounding 2-guards in the League, and that's something I would like to see happen for him," the coach goes on to say. "You're talking about a guy who really likes to play. He puts the work in and I think also, he was a little nervous after he signed



that contract and even before it, and there was a little bit of a time period where I think he was just sorting things out. But he's got a really good skill—an internal skill, an emotional skill—of not letting too many things bother him, and that's what you want out of a shooter. If he misses a shot or something happens, he can bounce back and do stuff.

"I think that aspect of his game has grown and he's beginning to welcome the challenge of being a great player. I think Steph is a bit ahead of him in that regard because he's older. But I think Klay is seeing that and embracing it."

Now, none of the above completely explains the Dubs' dominance (only two home losses at press time, a 19-game winning streak early in the season), but

the behind-the-scenes work Thompson and Curry put in and their shared team-first ideals lend substance to the style that has made them must-see TV and increased title expectations. But when you have a 27-year-old PG capable of making defenders look silly off the dribble, with his court vision and by being able to drop 51 on a moment's notice, playing with a 24-year-old shooting guard with the ability to score 37 in a single quarter, 52 overall for the game, and his J might rank second in the L to his aforementioned teammate—by virtue of Curry topping Thompson in the final round of the All-Star Weekend Three-Point Contest—sometimes it's best to not overthink things, watch history unfold and just let it flow.

You know, like water. **\$**

At Last?



2015
Playoffs



WHILE SKEPTICAL FANS AROUND THE COUNTRY
FIND IT HARD TO BELIEVE
THE LONG-BORING

HAWKS

ACTUALLY HAVE WHAT IT TAKES TO PLAY INTO JUNE,
THE TEAM'S ALL-FOR-ONE MENTALITY
HAS THE TITLE-STARVED CITY GOING
ALL IN WITH THE LOVE.

BY DEMARCO WILLIAMS

America, the city of Atlanta doesn't blame you for what's happening right now. It knows you have no control over the airwaves. You have nothing to do with the NBA's national TV scheduling. It knows that you simply watch the games that are aired and tweet about what you see. If it's Pelicans-Suns on the docket that night, well, then, your timeline will just have to be filled with Markieff Morris comments.

Orlando Magic. And even in those instances when they do get national love, it feels more like pity than smart programming meant to show off an über-efficient team that was 53-14 around St. Patrick's Day.

Atlanta has nothing against *Sports Illustrated* either for doing a tri-cover "NBA Midseason Report" and not having the decency to include the Hawks as one of the three choices.

something?

If you're a little slow with the nod, allow us to introduce you to a few folks with ATL ties, some of them Joe Everydays and others a wee bit more famous, who all echo the same sentiment: These underappreciated Atlanta Hawks are overdue for a long Playoff run. None of these passionate followers are upset about your reluctance to recognize the real, but they

as any to express as much. The day was a typical Monday. The Sacramento Kings were in town, not exactly the marquee name to get Philips Arena all in a tizzy. Even without the headline-making opposition, the place had energy to it. When you looked up to the 300 and 400 sections, there were fans in nearly every seat. A season ago, those areas would be so desolate you could have a flag football tournament

"THEY TURN DOWN GOOD SHOTS TO GET GREAT SHOTS. THEY HAVE PATIENCE. THEY'RE A GOOD DEFENSIVE TEAM. THEY GET THEIR HANDS IN THE GAME AND CREATE AN OFFENSE FROM DEFENSE. I THINK YOU'RE SEEING A VERY SPECIAL BASKETBALL TEAM."

—KARL

It's not your fault that you don't see these Atlanta Hawks but on the rarest of occasions—at press time, the East-leading Hawks had but two games slated the last month of the regular season for ESPN or NBA TV; that's as many as the lowly

The team understands that it doesn't have a flashy guard or a coach who drops sound-byte gold every night. But at the same time, don't 19-game winning streaks, undefeated Januarys and four All-Star Game selections still mean

would like you to know that, starting now, you either find a spot on the bandwagon or you're road kill on their road to the Finals.

March 9 isn't the actual date that we realized things were different, but it's as good of a time

between the aisles. Tarp would cover the rows so things didn't look so bleak when Memphis came.

March 9 proved something—it doesn't matter if it's the Kings or King James, the arena is going to rock and the home



squad is going to rep. That night, the Hawks' patent-pending spread-the-ball, fun-for-all game plan was on full display, too. The team had an NBA season-high 42 assists and knocked down a Philips Arena-record 20 three-pointers en route to eviscerating Sacramento, 130-105.

"They play at a very quick pace," admits Kings coach George Karl after the contest. "Very seldom does your defense ever get in a comfort zone. And they shoot the ball. It's almost like they get yelled at if they don't shoot the three. They're told, 'If you're open with the three ball, fire.' They turn down good shots to get great shots. They have patience. No one wants to give them credit, but they're a good defensive team. They get their hands in the game and create an offense from defense. Rebounding is an area that might be one of their weaknesses but I think you're seeing a very special basketball team."

But before the city had time to digest the quote or the victory, the Hawks were back in action, this time on the opposite end of a mile-high massacre just two days later in Denver. During the 13-point loss to the Nuggets, the team looked flat, almost disinterested on the boards. As Kenneth Faried came down with a rebound, a lethargic Atlanta frontcourt was just leaving its feet.

Every team has those kinds of nights. Only in Atlanta's case this season, those anomalies have fueled haters' flames. Twitter lights up with "So, here are the real Hawks" posts. Text messages load up on LOLs and laughing emojis. Where were these same trolls during the January streak? Hell, where were they last week?

"The dynamics of being an Atlanta fan are different from anywhere else," begins Jamal Richardson, a self-described Hawks fanatic for all 36 of his years. "After a bad loss for a fan in Cleveland, they go to work, shake their heads at each other and that's it. For me, when I go to work after a loss, it's almost like I'm being interviewed—What happened to your boys? I don't think that happens in any other city but ours because of the diversity here."

He's not exaggerating, either. Many longtime fans around town have similar stories. You have to defend your team after a loss. You have to explain your team after a win. It's a wonder the city hasn't needed professional therapy for all it has endured.

Unsympathetic transplants are an issue, but they're not the only one. Atlanta's done a lot of the damage to itself. The city's teams, be them college or pro, haven't won a championship in a major sport since the Braves' spirited World Series run in 1995. (But we see you, Atlanta Silverbacks, 2013 North American Soccer League spring season champs!) Since the mid-'90s, there have been a couple of close calls and almost-theres, but no trophies. Blame Eugene Robinson, Mark Richt, Paul Hewitt and whomever else you want for the misfortunes. Just don't blame a ticker-tape parade for midday traffic jams because there haven't been any ticker-tape parades.

When you've experienced so much sorrow for so long, it numbs you. You start to doubt. Maybe you aren't on TNT for a reason. Maybe having every starter named Eastern Conference Player of the Month for January isn't that big a deal. Have so many humdrum seasons and a 12-1 home record against the West won't get the juices flowing nearly as much as it should.

"Being an Atlanta sports fan in general, I always have my trepidation," says Eli Kirshtein, an SEC-loving sports nut who also happens to be a *Top Chef* alum and owner of one of Atlanta's buzziest new restaurants, The Luminary. "The fact of the matter is that we rarely get it done. With the Falcons [in 2013], they were playing really well but they had a bad defense. They were squeaking by. But the Hawks are playing great basketball. They're winning against great teams. It makes it hard for anybody to not like it." While we can't say definitively, that seems to be the universal mindset around the metro Atlanta area—cautious optimism.

One of the biggest sources of concern from outsiders is the Hawks' supposed lack of star power. Looking at the





FASTER THAN BIG BOI RIPS THROUGH A TRACK, THE HAWKS HAVE REPAIRED THEIR REPUTATION.

Last summer, the Hawks may have passed the Clippers when it came to being despised. This is the hometown of Martin Luther King Jr. and for Hawks majority owner Bruce Levenson to declare black NBA fans were scaring away white NBA fans was abominable. Levenson's e-mail missive about black fans being bad for white business, which was uncovered last July, was only part of the plague around the Hawks. There was also the dart from General Manager Danny Ferry. While reading from a scouting report, Ferry said free agent Luol Deng had "a little African in him." Alarms sounded because Ferry didn't choke on those words in mid-sentence.

Culturally, these blunders were more than enough to castigate the franchise, but the Hawks also earned scorn for their actual basketball strategy, which centered around the belief that they did not need a superstar to win in the NBA. Preposterous, many thought.

The crush of the negative vibes should have taken more than a year to subside, but it didn't. On a recent Friday at 6:30 p.m., an hour before Atlanta takes on the Cavs in a throbbing Phillips Arena, Hawks CEO Steve Koonin (above, with Harry the Hawk) has to push away from NBA execs, well-wishers, business leaders and joyous fans to get to a 6:30 appointment. He was 10 minutes late for his appointment, a disgrace for a southern gentleman. "It's been one of those days," he says. "I couldn't get away. Sorry."

It's understandable, Stevie, it really is. Hosannas for the Hawks have replaced barbs. Koonin got an e-mail from a CEO of local company, which does not have an advertising stake in the Hawks, telling him that he has proclaimed Friday "Hawks Day at the office" or some such thing. Koonin's CEO pal encouraged employees to wear their Hawks gear to work. "That's a watershed moment," Koonin says, "when a major company with no stake in your business does something like that."

Everybody loves a winner, sure, but success on the floor is only part of the reason for the turnaround. The Hawks are remodeling to fit the urban core of Atlanta, which is younger, more diverse, less bound by the conventions of race. Younger fans are flocking through the turnstiles at Phillips Arena. Black and white.

"The target audience of youth, 18 to 34, is up 300 percent," Koonin said. "We have gotten much younger, more relevant to a young audience and that is key to building a brand, for advertising, and most important sustaining and building a fan base... We reflect what's happening in Atlanta. We're diverse, we're young, we're social-media driven."

The music inside the arena, both DJ-played as well as banged out by our man Sir Foster, the NBA's coolest organist, reflects the diversity of the crowd.

The issues surrounding Levenson and Ferry are still to be dealt with. Levenson and the other Hawks owners have agreed to sell the team and the deal could be done by mid-summer. Ferry, the architect of this sudden NBA Championship contender, was put on indefinite suspension for his remarks and his fate will likely be decided by the new owners.

Around the concourse before a March game with Cleveland, the fans seemed ready to give Ferry another chance. In a random sampling of 25 fans, 20 gave Ferry a thumbs up, five a thumbs down.

The Hawks are taking nothing for granted. In December, they hired Nzinga Shaw to be the NBA's first diversity and inclusion executive. It is not window dressing. She has set up a local council of 21 people of diverse backgrounds to help the franchise sort through issues of race and inclusion. "I think I was very cognizant of the fact that people might think my job was to mask an issue," Shaw says. "I would never take a position for show. I am very young. I have a lot of enthusiasm around the issue of diversity and inclusion. I knew that if I took this role I was going to make it real no matter what."

Shaw's mandate is to make sure "inclusion" also pertains to tickets. There are economic issues in the center of Atlanta and NBA fans can be priced out by tickets and concessions. The Hawks, who are selling out routinely, have allotted 1,500 tickets for \$15 and not all of those seats are halfway to the moon on the top row of the arena.

Business is good. Digital connects—Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, Hawks.com—are up 300 to 400 percent. Retail is up 150 percent, Koonin said. There does not seem to be much leftover stench from last summer.

"There are a few people who dwell on the past and for those folks that is their mindset," Koonin said. "As an organization we have moved on with the things that we feel we need to connect us to the citizen. Things are going extraordinarily well." —RAY GLIER



"BEING AN ATLANTA SPORTS FAN IN GENERAL, I ALWAYS HAVE TREPIDATION, BECAUSE WE RARELY GET IT DONE. BUT THE HAWKS ARE PLAYING GREAT BASKETBALL AND THEY'RE WINNING AGAINST GREAT TEAMS."

—KIRSSTEIN

NBA Champions since 2000, only twice has the winner's leading scorer averaged under 20 points a night—last year with the San Antonio Spurs (Tony Parker, 16.7ppg) and the '08 Celtics (Paul Pierce, 19.6). Atlanta gets the concern, but responds with three players—Al Horford, Paul Millsap and Jeff Teague—who score over 15. Toss in the more-than-capable trio of Kyle Korver, DeMarre Carroll and reserve spark plug Dennis Schröder and you understand why all the talk irks the front office.

"What's the definition of your superstar?" asks Hawks vice president of basketball Dominique Wilkins. "Guys who do high-wire acts and *ohhh* and *ahhh* the crowd? That doesn't make you a superstar. It's the

efficiency and consistency within a player that makes him a star."

Though head coach Mike Budenholzer's Hawks have that in spades, most post-season pundits still have the Cleveland Cavaliers coming out of the East. For the sake of brevity, we'll ignore the fact that third-string Atlanta point guard Shelvin Mack has more Playoff experience than Kyrie Irving and Kevin Love combined. All you and everybody else see, and it is understandable, is LeBron James. Should these two teams square off in the Eastern Conference Finals, he'll single-handedly will Cleveland to the series win, right?

Hardly. A loaded Cavs team visited Atlanta in early March. They left 106-97 losers in a

game that had an atmosphere as electric as any playoff game that ESPN could hope for in late April. (Not that you would know any of this, seeing as how the match-up only garnered regional TV coverage.) The win was Atlanta's third in four meetings against Cleveland.

Locals are intrigued by a potential post-season run-in. "I think we stand a chance at beating them [in the Playoffs] even without a superstar," says Killer Mike, proud A-town stomper and one-half of the critically acclaimed rap duo Run the Jewels. "A sound team and superb play can win the day. It will help if LeBron ain't 100 percent healthy, too. It will be a dog fight like the [Hawks and Boston Celtics were in the] '80s. I wanna see a playoff like that."

"Their bigs do a great job of rim running," tells Kyrie Irving, who chipped in 20 points in the losing effort on March 6. "And Kyle draws so much attention himself. You just gotta give them credit. We take our lessons and move on. That's a good team down there. Gotta give respect."

"I think we've played some good basketball," admits Horford, who anchored the defining triumph over a Cavs squad that was in the midst of a 20-4 stretch. "It definitely feels good to get a win on this type of stage. They had their whole team and we had our whole team. We just went and were able to play a great game."

Statement wins are one thing. Statement seasons are something else. If the latter is ever going to happen in Georgia, the hoops heavens couldn't align any better in 2015: The Hawks' core has remained relatively healthy; a one-time threat in the East, the Toronto Raptors, has cooled; the summer controversy with general manager Danny Ferry has calmed.

"Atlanta might not have been the ideal sports city for everybody," says Shoni Schimmel, a Hawks admirer who also happens to be a budding star on the Atlanta Dream and the WNBA's 2014 All-Star Game MVP. "But with the Hawks doing their thing and the Dream coming up, I think we're starting to put ourselves more on the map."

Should the Atlanta Hawks keep defying the doubters and get past the Cavs, Bulls and everyone else in the East, they'll make their first NBA Finals appearance since the franchise moved from St. Louis in 1961. Fifty-four years is a long time to come up with some awfully compelling reasons why it won't happen. The title-starved city of Atlanta only needs one to believe that it could. **\$**



Sorry

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the
WAIT

2015
Playoffs

AFTER A SLOW START TO HIS
FIRST SEASON BACK IN CLEVELAND,

LEBRON JAMES

HAS THE CAVALIERS
TURNED UP TO
CHAMPIONSHIP-
CONTENDER LEVEL
ONCE AGAIN.

BY ABE SCHWADRON



"Someone once told me, 'Time is a flat circle.'"

Our world is not one for the patient. We want things to happen right now. It's no longer what have you done for me lately, but what have you done for me yesterday? Today? And basketball is no different.

Fans and pundits form opinions at the flick of a wrist, cooking up hot takes faster than Hot Pockets. The best college players rarely spend more than one season in school. In reality that means spending less than a calendar year on campus. Once at the pro level, NBA rookies are usually judged by the All-Star break of their first season. For the most part, those who don't show promise right away are dealt for future Draft picks or expiring contracts (word to Thomas Robinson), and a large percentage of those guys are often out of the League entirely by the end of their first deal (paging Jan Vesely). This season alone, the Boston Celtics have had more than 40 different players on their roster. The Sacramento Kings are on their third coach since December. Patience is no longer a part of the NBA lexicon.

Aside from the well-documented (and probably ill-fated) philosophy being implemented in Philadelphia, piloting an NBA team in 2015 is more than ever a win-now proposition. If you have a couple All-Stars on your roster, taking home the Larry O'Brien trophy is your goal, no

excuses. Gone are the days of waiting good-naturedly while teams "figure things out."

Tweets pile up by the thousands per minute during nationally televised games, an overwhelming majority of them negative. Miss a shot and you suck. Turn the ball over and you're the worst player on the court. God forbid you get dunked on while trying to, you know, play defense. Even spectacular plays are overshadowed by memes. Shit, *TIME* Magazine—is it even a print mag anymore?—ran an article entitled "Twitter Reacts to LeBron's Replenished Hairline" earlier this season.

Let's back up for a second. We're just about nine months removed from the mid-July date last summer when LeBron's open letter announcing his return to Cleveland was published by *Sports Illustrated*. If it already seems like a lifetime ago, that's because it is—at least, by our warped understanding of time in the NBA's modern era.

The news shook me. Like so many others, I wondered how LeBron, now 30, could leave the juggernaut in Miami. I feared LeBron might disappear from the Finals for a few years as the Cavs went through the inevitable feeling-out process that occurred in Miami—only this time with a younger, more inexperienced, less battle-tested core. I feared not being able to witness his greatness on the game's greatest stage.

As former NBA Champion and current Heat front office exec Alonzo Mourning wondered aloud in a recent *SLAM* interview, "Why walk away from a dynasty when you have to go somewhere and rebuild, basically?" Forgetting for a moment that LBJ is not only one of the fiercest competitors since Michael Jordan, but also a player so acutely aware of his image since his first Decision, it seemingly made little sense from a basketball standpoint. The Heat would have been a virtual lock for the NBA Finals for at least the next three or four years, so long as he, Dwyane Wade and Chris Bosh could stay healthy.

"I'm not promising a Championship," LeBron said of the Cavs in the open letter last summer. "I know how hard that is to deliver. We're not ready right now. No way. Of course, I want to win next year, but I'm realistic. It will be a long process, much longer than it was in 2010. My patience will get tested. I know that. I'm going into a situation with a young team and a new coach."

While Cavs fans were digging their No. 23 jerseys out of their closets (or dumpsters, in more than a few cases) LeBron was preaching patience. Whether out of fear from the inevitable criticisms that lay ahead or out of genuinely trying to view things realistically, LeBron essentially called his second go-round in Cleveland a work-in-progress, at the very best.

The realization that even

LeBron himself couldn't guarantee that he'd be playing into June this year was a terrifying one. Without LeBron James, the NBA Finals feel incomplete. Which is why LeBron's 2014-15 season has truly been one of his most masterful. Last month, he passed Allen Iverson for 22nd on NBA's all-time scoring list and Scottie Pippen for first in career assists by a forward—in the same week. And despite averaging his lowest scoring average since his rookie year (25.9 ppg, to go with 7.3 apg and 5.8 rpg), he's elevated the group around him—one that he helped expertly build, all on the fly—to such heights that we've already forgotten his appeal to common sense last summer. Truth is, LeBron quietly has the Cleveland Cavaliers way ahead of schedule.

Back in August, as LeBron posed for the cover of *SLAM* 185, a carefree Kyrie Irving had this to say about adjusting to playing alongside his new teammate: "Everybody is saying, 'Is he going to have to change his game?' Or, 'Is he going to have to do this or that to play with LeBron?' Obviously, some things are going to have to change but, in terms of my game, I am who I am, he is who he is, and we're going to do our best to make our games work with each other. I think that's what makes great teams and what makes great teammates. I'm sure he doesn't want me

to be any different and I don't want him to be any different. That's just how it's going to be—we're just going to tailor our games to each other."

It sounded great. Ky was excited. So was LeBron, and later Kevin Love. And while today, as you read this, Irving's words might finally ring true for the No. 2 in the East, 46-26 Cavaliers, how quickly we forget it's been far from "just" that easy.

wall, or if his weight loss was to blame. There have been reports about a "disconnect" between Bron and head coach David Blatt. In December, a few "sources" had James ready to bolt from Cleveland yet again. James has referred to the potpourri of injuries he's suffered this season as "the most difficult thing I've been through." Even his 2K15 rating took a slight hit. Oh, the shade.

no question." Thirteen words. Sixty-three characters. Short enough to fit comfortably in a tweet. So much for not being ready right away, huh?

The top-seeded Hawks aren't a facade. The Bulls are always tough, too, and who knows which Derrick Rose will show up in the postseason, if he plays at all. The Toronto Raptors or the Washington Wizards could get hot. But gun to my head, who

was bold, and at certain junctures of this first season back in Cleveland, it felt highly questionable. But this is still LeBron James we're talking about. In a sport where teams spend years and years accumulating Draft picks and "assets" to build a winner, he alone has flipped the fortunes of a franchise in less than one. When he said, "We're not ready right now," he only meant the roster around him

TRUTH IS, *LEBRON QUIETLY HAS THE CLEVELAND CAVALIERS WAY AHEAD OF SCHEDULE.*

About a week into the season, the Cavs sitting at 1-3, the noise was so loud that LeBron felt obligated to tweet out "In the words of the great @Aaron-Rodgers12 'RELAX'." A few days later, he literally apologized for not dunking enough. Twelve games in, King James told reporters, "I stink." Columnists wondered if he'd finally hit the

But with the King's blessing, the Cavs methodically re-tooled their roster, bringing in JR Smith, Iman Shumpert and Timofey Mozgov, while bidding adieu to Dion Waiters, among others. Buried in LeBron's homecoming letter, lost in all the hoopla, was this simple sentence: "My goal is still to win as many titles as possible,

wins the East? Cleveland, and it ain't really all that close. GM LeBron has transformed the Cavs' roster into a well-oiled machine with a series of critical transactions. Player LeBron is well-rested and ready to rev things up to Championship level come Game 1 of the postseason.

Yeah, LeBron going home was and is a big fucking deal. It

wasn't yet complete. Now, it's barreling full steam ahead into the postseason.

The doubts will linger, and the hate will come in waves. James won't complain about the rising expectations, instead he'll rise with the tide. So give Bron his just due when he delivers, earlier than anyone expected. **S**



SLAMUPS

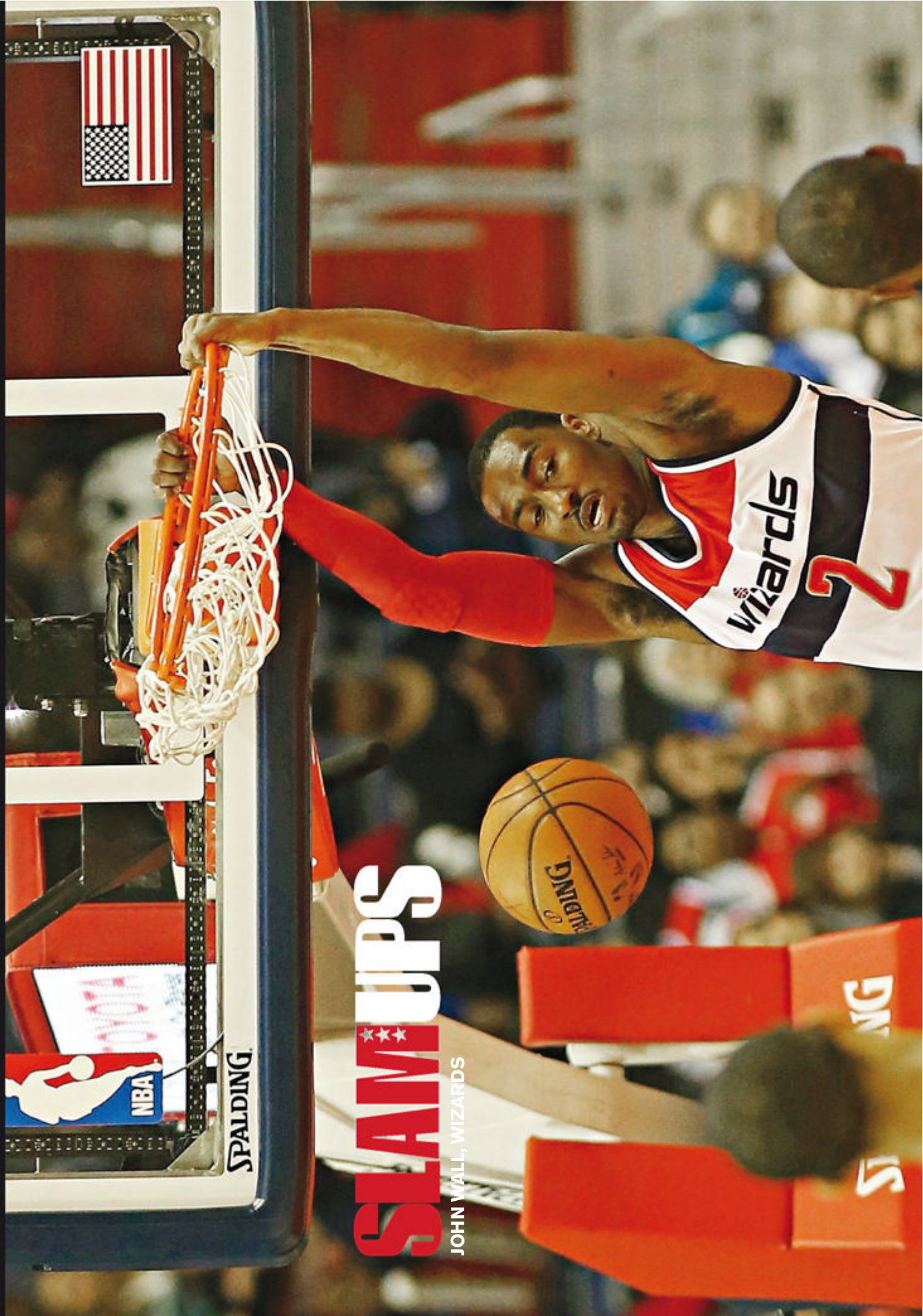
ZACH RANDOLPH, GRIZZLIES





SLAMUPS

JOHN WALL, WIZARDS





2015
Playoffs

ALL

WITH FOUR CHAMPIONSHIP
RINGS AND AN EXTREMELY
DIVERSE PORTFOLIO OF
ENDORSEMENT DEALS,
TONY PARKER IS A MODEL
NBA STAR.

BY BEN OSBORNE



BUSINESS, MAN



“PLAYING WELL FOR THE SPURS WILL ALWAYS BE MY PRIORITY AND THEN WHATEVER I DO, OFF THE COURT THEY TRUST ME TO FIND THE RIGHT BALANCE.”

It's an early season off day, and Tony Parker's Spurs are in New York to play the Brooklyn Nets. For the more culturally curious members of the team, this might mean visiting a museum or other site. For others, catching up with Big Apple-based fam. For Coach Pop, a wine shop. For Tony Parker, though, coming through NYC means one thing: business.

At the moment, I and a handful of other media members are gathered at the hip Standard Hotel in New York's Meatpack-

ing District to listen to Tony speak on his partnership with Bollé Eyewear. From here, he'll go to an event with Tissot Watches, who he also endorses.

In between his pseudo press conferences, the 32-year-old Frenchman, whose career already includes four NBA Championships and six All-Star appearances, sat with SLAM for a few.

SLAM: A big part of your partnership with Bollé is producing

protective eyewear for young basketball players. How much exposure do you have to kids?

TP: I do camps every summer in France. I go back for three weeks and I do my camps. We have, like, 700-750 kids every summer, and I've been doing that for a lot of years. That's why I was saying earlier, that I had no idea about the positive impact protective glasses can have on kids and that's what made me want to do it. Obviously I had a big injury in my eye, and from there I started working with the Bollé team to try and create the best product that we can for kids.

SLAM: Do you like your trips to New York maybe more than other NBA cities because of all the companies and media that are based here?

TP: Yeah, I love it. It's a great city, a lot of fun. A lot of French people here, too, so I can catch up with friends. Hopefully I will be an All-Star so I can come back and catch up with everybody again.

SLAM: Lots of NBA players have endorsement deals, but you may have the most interesting, worldly mix of deals of anyone in the League. You have this deal with Bollé. Your shoe deal is with the Chinese brand, PEAK. You have a special watch with Tissot. You're backing that Earl Lloyd

documentary [The First To Do It]. Can you speak on all this stuff?

TP: I just like to diversify. We only live once and I just try to do stuff that affects me. The glasses, they affect me. I like wearing watches, so when the Tissot brand came to me, it was an unbelievable opportunity to have my own watch, my own line, and it's been going great with them. I have four watches with them now and we just did an extension. And then the project with the movie, that came to me from Michael Finley, my teammate who I won the Championship with in 2007. He knows I'm a big fan of the history of the NBA, the history of basketball. So I was kind of surprised that it didn't happen before, that a documentary like that didn't exist. I was like, 'Really?' I thought it was weird. So I was like, 'Of course I'll be part of it, it's a great project.' Then there's PEAK, of course, and I have a deal with the car company Renault, where I'm an ambassador for them. For both of those deals we do a lot of stuff in China.

SLAM: Does most of this come from you and your team at CAA, or is this brands pitching to you?

TP: Half and half. People are coming to me, and then sometimes they pitch stuff and so, me,

I'm always open to do stuff. Like I said, you only live once...

SLAM: Some people like to stereotype San Antonio as a place where "no one cares about players from there." Has that ever been a challenge or do you think because you're so international, that it doesn't matter what market you're in?

TP: It doesn't matter that San Antonio is a small market for me. I'm international, I'm with the national team, I play in the Olympics. It really doesn't matter.

SLAM: OK, and how do you balance all of this stuff with your basketball? Tim Duncan may have a few deals, but he, Kawhi, most of your teammates really stay out of the limelight, so I think it's fair to say you're the biggest celebrity and most-endorser friendly athlete on the Spurs. What's Pop or Timmy's attitude to you having more off-court commitments than everyone else?

TP: They don't mind, they don't mind. They trust my judgment and they know that playing well for the Spurs will always be my priority and then whatever I do off the court, they just trust me to find that right balance.

SLAM: Speaking of the Spurs, what's your motivation this season? You guys have won so much, you took care of the revenge angle last season...

TP: Well, we never did a back-to-back and that's a great challenge for us. Obviously we understand we have a big target on our backs and everybody wants to beat us because we're the champions and we have to defend it, but I think for us, it's a great challenge because we never did back-to-back. Yes, we won five Championships, but we never did back-to-back. Everybody, including Pop, is very motivated by that.

It's mid-March now, and the Spurs are back in New York for the first time since the visit detailed above. At the time of the last visit, they were 13-4 and looking every bit like title favorites. From mid-December til late-February, however, the Spurs were barely looking like a Playoff team, and honestly, an injured Parker was a big reason why. He missed 13 games thanks to a sore left hamstring, and the Spurs struggled in his absence (Kawhi Leonard's injury issues didn't help either). Needless to say, the All-Star Weekend trip Tony was looking forward to never materialized.

Today, however, with San Antonio in town to play the Knicks

and spring on the horizon, things are almost back to normal in Spurs land. In a recent five-game stretch, Parker went for 19, 24, 32, 23 and 31 points, looking as spry as ever. More importantly, the Spurs won four of the five games, with the one loss being an overtime thriller against the Cavs that looked a lot like a) the best game of the regular season and b) a lot like what the Finals may look like.

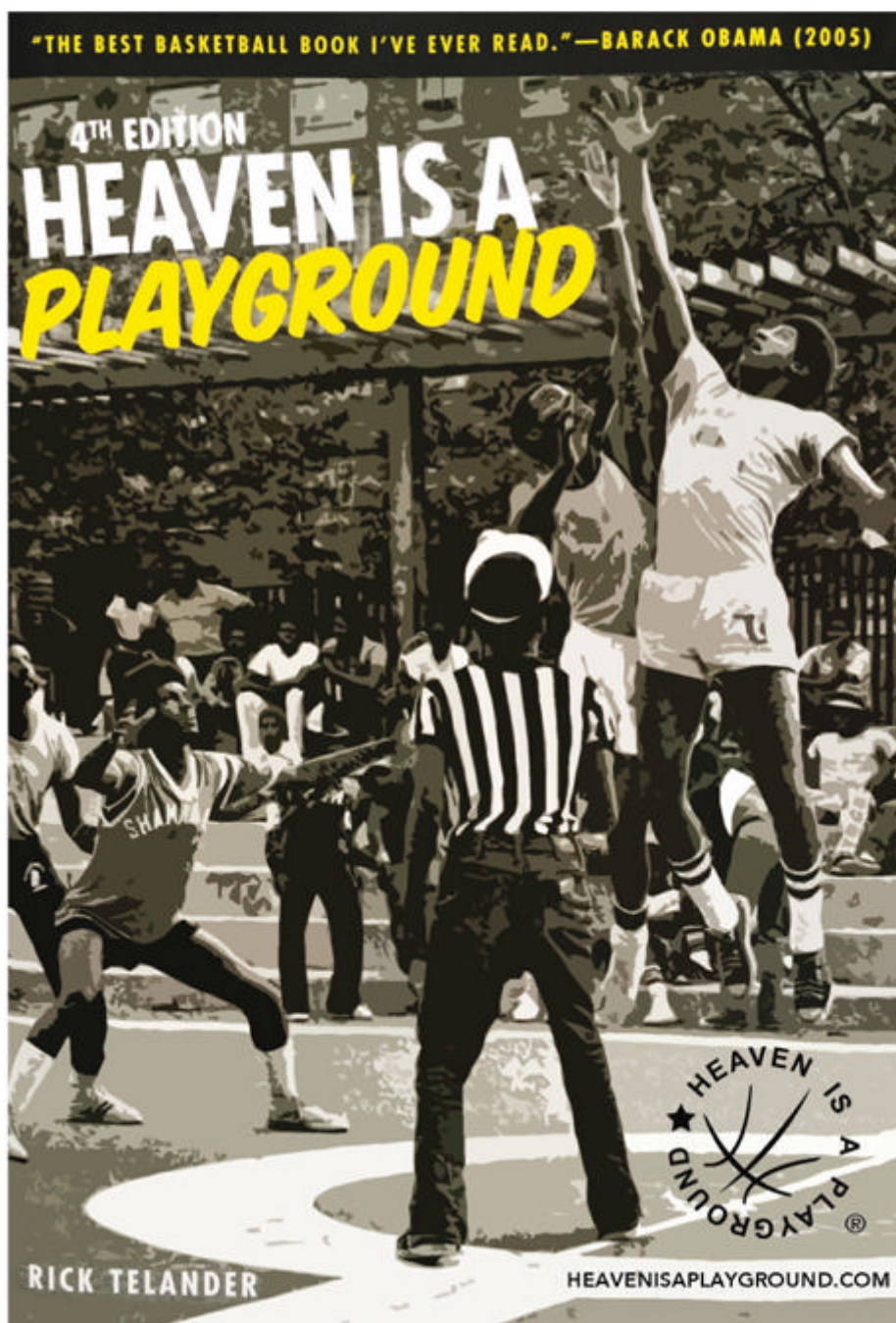
Everyone knows that when Parker plays well, the Spurs are a different team. "If he's not

the Tony Parker of past years, we're not going anywhere," Popovich told the *San Antonio Express-News* recently. "But he's serious about it and that's good. He's the main part of our game as far as pace and scoring. He makes a lot happen when he's getting 18, 20, 26 points. There are not many nights when Timmy [Duncan] or Manu [Ginobili] are going to get 26 or 28, but the teams we are playing have a lot of those guys. Tony is our guy and we need that."

From a relatively mediocre

statline a month ago, Parker is up to almost-familiar per-game averages of 15 points and 5 assists as we go to press, with his typically solid percentages (48 percent from the field, 81 percent from the line).

And as we go to press, the Spurs are 19 games above .500, firmly in the Playoffs and look very capable of securing homecourt advantage for at least the first round. Would you want to bet against them with Tony, Kawhi and the rest feeling healthy? That sounds like bad business to us. **\$**



WEIRD ROLO

EVER-QUIRKY **ROBIN LOPEZ** DOES THE DIRTY—AND VITAL—WORK FOR THE FEISTY PORTLAND TRAIL BLAZERS.

BY LEO SEPKOWITZ

Picture Robin Lopez at his favorite spot in Portland, Powell's Books. His eyes are buried in a comic book—he is a shameless fanatic. His forehead is covered by a curly afro that makes Anderson Varejao wonder if it might be time to try Rogaine. A dark patch of hair triangulates below his lower lip. If it's warm enough for shorts, you might catch him in his trademark knee-high tube socks. His city's motto begs its citizens to keep it weird, and Lopez has no trouble doing that.

"Portland really plays to my interests," Lopez happily confesses. "It's just perfect for me."

And he is perfect for it. Perfect for the community, flush with endearing funkiness, and for its Blazers, whose long-time need for a rugged center has been answered by the West Coast native.

"When we brought Robin in, the primary focus was having a defensive-minded center next to [LaMarcus Aldridge]," third-year coach Terry Stotts says. "He fit the bill exceedingly well."

The Blazers needed an enforcer, and they found a 7-footer with a passion for throwing 'bows.

"I love going in there, banging with the big guys," Lopez says. "That's fun. That's the level of basketball—the level of competition—you want to be at. I wouldn't want it any other way."

Lopez's fondness for dirty work began while playing AAU ball alongside his twin brother, score-first Brook, and swingman Quincy Pondexter.

"I didn't always have the ball in my hands, so I was trying to help out my teammates any

way I could," Lopez remembers. "That's not something everybody is willing to do. It's not something everybody is willing to do well, more importantly."

Consider Lopez the L's premier handyman. He spends his nightly half-hour providing endless high screens for Damian Lillard. His off-ball picks free up Portland's sharpshooters on the wings. Around the rim, Lopez always checks the opponent's baddest bully.

"Robin is very unique in what he brings," Stotts says. "He embraces the team more than anything else. He understands how it fits together. He cares about the right things, and that makes a difference when you're trying to win as a team."

Those aren't the types of attributes that earn players max contracts. Teams do not tank for a guy because he shoots free throws well enough to stay on the floor in a tight game's closing minutes (Lopez has hit 76 percent of his freebies over six years). But Lopez has perfected the small stuff, allowing an impressive supporting cast to shine.

"There were already so many tremendously talented players here that I didn't have to do anything," Lopez says. "We had such great people on the team, it was really hard to screw that up."

Lopez is, of course, being overly modest. But there's plenty of truth there, too.

Many of Portland's core pieces were in place before RoLo was acquired via trade in July of 2013. Take Lillard, unbothered by concepts like defenders being good or 30-footers being hard to make. Or Aldridge, impossibly consistent, devastating from anywhere inside

of 20 feet. Wesley Matthews Jr doubled as the team's deadliest shooter and stingiest perimeter defender until a March Achilles injury. (Newcomer Arron Afflalo figures to be a serviceable replacement.) Nicolas Batum acts as a ballhandler one night and a three-point specialist the next; an energizer in an opening quarter and a defensive wiz by the fourth.

Yep, plenty of talent was laying around in 2013 without Lopez, but it amounted to only 33 wins and a bottom-five defense. Portland improved by 21 games last season in Lopez's first year with the team. So far this year, the Blazers own the League's third-stoutest defense per 100 possessions.

Portland has morphed from a good regular-season team (152 wins from 2009-2011, 6-12 in the Playoffs) into a balanced force ready to erase 15 years of post-season futility.

Admittedly, it would be foolish to credit only Lopez—Lillard and Aldridge are each fringe MVP candidates still on the rise. But there's a case to be made for a puzzle's final piece being its most important, regardless of size.

With Lopez locked in place, the Blazers will likely open the post-season at home. There will be at least one avalanche of momentum that swings a game their way, a Rip City staple. Dame Time is inevitable. Aldridge will deliver when it counts. The duo will be heavily praised when the game is over.

Nothing wrong with any of that—we watch the game to marvel at its stars.

Just don't forget to tip your wonky handyman if you ever do see him around. **\$**



2015
Playoffs







TUFF STUFF

SIX-TIME NBA ALL-STAR BAILEY HOWELL DID WHATEVER NEEDED TO BE DONE TO REACH HIS POTENTIAL, BECOMING A LEGENDARY HALL OF FAMER IN THE PROCESS.

BY MICHAEL BRADLEY

Bailey Howell just wouldn't listen on Sundays. He didn't want to hear his aching muscles screaming. Or his weary bones complaining. He was tired and beaten down. But there would be no day of rest for him. It was time to overcome the pain and fatigue. To summon the strength and discipline necessary to race past those who were listening to their bodies begging for relief.

The NBA was different in the '60s. There were no fat television contracts, and attendance was spotty, especially for mid-week contests. The League packed its action into the weekends, hoping for more fans, and that meant some stretches of three games in three days—and even a withering four straight sometimes. By Sunday, the strain of competition and travel would knock some players back. They might be on the court, but they weren't too keen on working all that hard.

A cranky knee or bum shoulder made more convincing arguments than did pride and duty.

That was when Howell went deep. Back to the times when his school would let out in the fall to let the kids help with the cotton harvest. Some vacation, huh? He remembered the work he put in with his small-town Tennessee high school team that helped it reach the state tournament, despite being part of a graduating class of just 34. He would fix his mind, do the best he could to ignore the pain and play.

"I felt like every night you needed to contribute, whether you felt good or not," Howell says. "We played a lot of games on Friday nights, Saturday nights and Sunday afternoons. On Sunday afternoon, everybody was out there feeling sorry for themselves. If I could make my body do it with the strength of my mind, I was all right. I had some of my good games on Sundays."

Howell didn't just produce

on the weekends. Throughout his Hall of Fame career, the 6-7 forward brought his roughhouse brand of basketball every game. A six-time All-Star and two-time World Champion, Howell scored efficiently, rebounded physically and competed with an abandon that made him the perfect teammate—and a fearsome opponent. Howell wasn't dirty. It's just that in a League that included some of the fastest and springiest, he was neither. He compensated with effort and overwhelming desire. No one was going to outwork Howell.

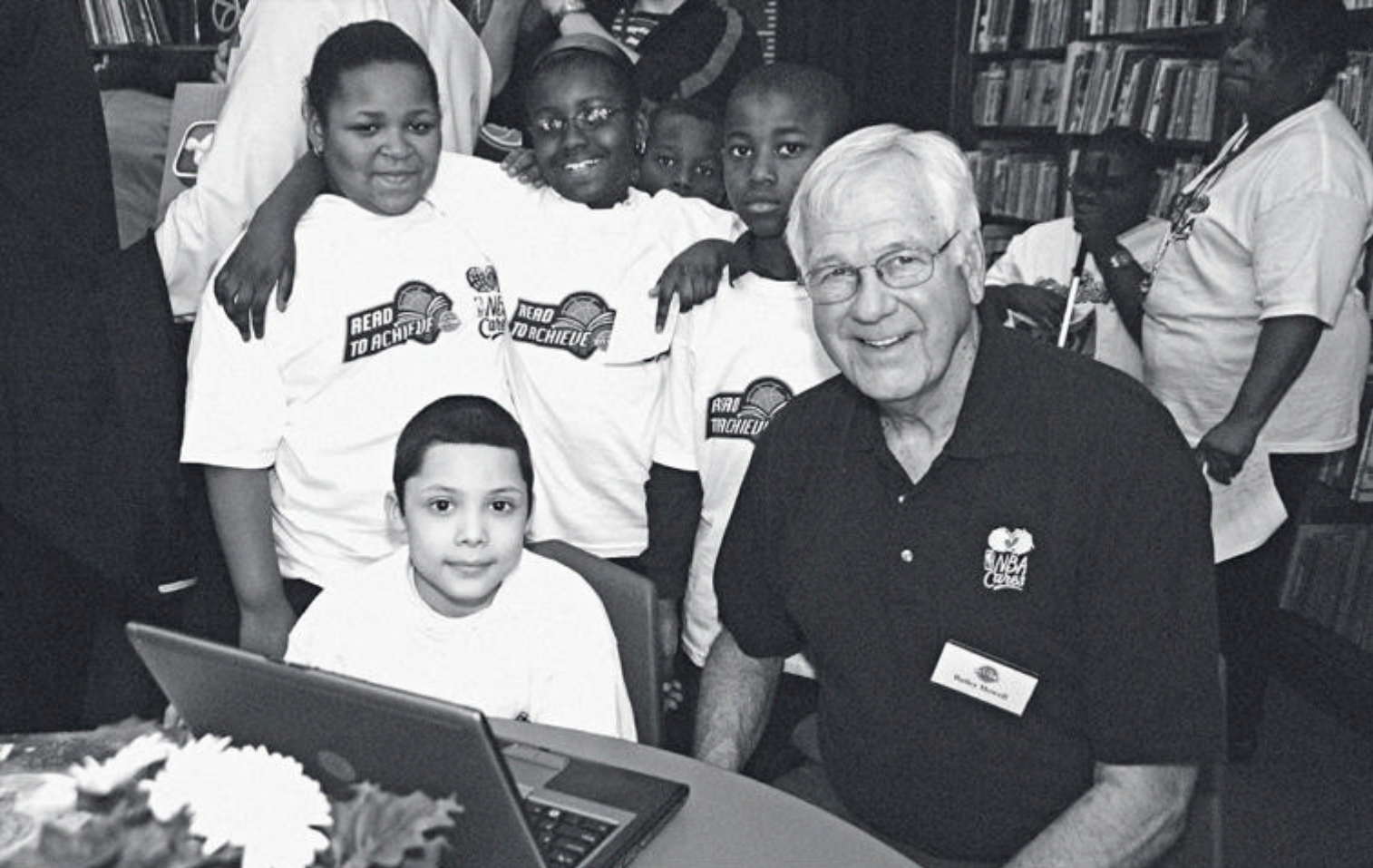
"He was a fierce competitor," Hall of Fame forward Billy Cunningham says. "He would do anything humanly possible to stop you from scoring or to score himself. He was right on the edge."

"When we were on the same team [in 1970-71], I made sure I didn't play against him in practice. I'd end up with a welt."

It's hard to imagine the soft-spoken Howell as a dervish on

court, but he understood early that his basketball path would continue not because of physical gifts—although at 6-7 and 210 pounds, he did have a frame suited for the 1960s game—but because of his hard work. An All-American at Mississippi State, Howell played for four NBA teams, but it was his four seasons in Boston, at the end of the Celtics' run of 11 titles in 13 years, that earned him most notice.

With teammates like Bill Russell, Sam Jones and John Havlicek, Howell wasn't going to stand out, even though he was Boston's second-leading scorer twice during his time there. The Celtics didn't run plays for him, and that was fine. He shot when he was supposed to, created opportunities for himself on the offensive boards and fit perfectly into the Celtics' team approach. And why wouldn't he? After playing in relative anonymity with Detroit and Baltimore for seven seasons, a player like Howell was delighted to be with a franchise



that operated the way he did.

"He was the perfect player for the Celtics," Cunningham says. "He didn't need the ball a great deal to score. When he was open, he shot it. He didn't pound the ball to beat somebody off the dribble. He knew his limitations, and he knew his strengths."

In today's hoops world, AAU ball is known for enough gear to fill a dozen gym bags, summer tourneys in Vegas and other hot spots and a rather laid-back approach to defense. When Howell finished his four years at Mississippi State, it was a much different scene. And he was thinking about becoming part of it—instead of playing in the NBA.

Back then, no high school kids played AAU basketball. Teams sponsored by companies around the country competed, usually with former college stars, and every four years the best of them all would represent the United States in the Olympics. Players received jobs that paid well and then practiced after work. It was a pretty good deal. There was only one problem.

"I wanted to play with the best," Howell says. "And, of course, the money was about double what you would make in

the AAU league."

That's why, when the Pistons took him with the second pick of the second round in 1959, Howell decided against becoming a company man and joined the NBA. It wasn't easy for a product of the South's farming world to move to the industrial Midwest, but Howell had an adjustment to make that went beyond the cultural divide. From the time he was a prep star through his three seasons in Starkville (freshmen weren't eligible to play at that time), he had been a center and was strong with his back to the basket. The NBA didn't have any 6-7 pivotmen, so Howell had to change his game.

"Playing on the perimeter meant I had to learn a new skill set I had never developed before," he says.

Howell may not have been able to take people off the dribble, but that didn't matter when he was in high school and college. Despite growing up in Middleton, TN, a town of "about 300 people," he attracted the attention of SEC programs. Kentucky, then (as now) the biggest thing in Southern basketball, sent an assistant coach to recruit Howell. But Mississippi State dispatched boss man

"I MADE MYSELF COME TO PLAY

EVERY NIGHT

WHETHER I WAS FEELING GOOD OR BAD, WHETHER MY LEGS WERE DEAD OR WHATEVER."

Babe McCarthy. "Ol Magnolia Mouth" lived up to his nickname, selling the Bulldog program to Howell and his family.

McCarthy's personal touch paid off handsomely. Howell became the bulwark of the MSU program and graduated as the

school's all-time leading scorer. (Jeff Malone passed him in 1983 but needed four years to do it.) The '58-59 Bulldogs finished 24-1 and captured the SEC title, losing only to Auburn. Howell was a First-Team All-American, but Mississippi State never

made it to the NCAA Tournament. The university's administration prohibited the team from playing because it didn't want the Bulldogs competing against rivals that had African-American players on their rosters. Howell had to settle for becoming Starkville royalty. The school has retired his number and named a street on campus after him.

"Most schools, once your eligibility is over, they kind of forget about you," Howell says. "That was not the case at Mississippi State. They have continued to promote me wherever they can. It has been a lifelong association."

Although Howell reports having to change his style of play to handle the switch from the pivot to forward, he was immediately successful in the NBA, averaging 17.8 ppg and 10.5 rpg with the Pistons as a rookie. Despite earning All-Star berths in each of his next four seasons in Detroit, the team finished below .500 every year. Because there were only nine teams in the League, the Pistons made the Playoffs four times but never truly contended.

In the summer after the '63-64 season, Howell was part of an eight-player trade that sent him to Baltimore. "They pretty much traded everyone on their rosters to each other," he says. His two seasons with the Bullets weren't much different than his time in Detroit. The team reached the Playoffs both years, largely by default, since it had a sub-.500 record both times. Howell continued his steady scoring and board work and played in the '65 All-Star Game, but he wasn't happy with being on the NBA's outskirts. That changed on September 1, 1966, when Baltimore traded him to Boston for Mel Counts. He'd gone from the margins to the NBA's seat of power. Boston had won nine of the last 10 titles. "Now, I'm in Fairyland," Howell says, laughing. Howell was perhaps the perfect person to join the Celtics, thanks to his commitment to the team and his tremendous competitiveness.

"Bailey was one of the nicest guys you were going to meet," says Kevin Loughery, who played 11 NBA seasons, including parts of four with Howell. "He was a deeply religious man. He never drank or smoked. But when the bell rang, he was a terror. He was one of the most underrated

players of his time."

Philadelphia snapped the Celtics' string of eight straight titles in 1966-67, Howell's first year in Boston. "Was I the kiss of death?" Howell jokingly asks. As the '67-68 season dawned, many thought the dynasty was done. Russell and Jones were old, and Philadelphia was rising. But despite finishing eight games behind the Sixers in the East, Boston won a seven-game conference championship series over Philadelphia, overcoming a 3-1 deficit in the process, and took care of the Lakers in six games to win it all. Howell was magnificent in the clincher in L.A., scoring 30 points and grabbing 11 boards.

"The tradition was there," Howell says. "It's hard to explain what it does for a team. It kind of allows you in tough games to win."

Howell finished second in scoring on the Celts in 1968-69, when Boston won its final title of the Russell era, dumping L.A. in seven games. He lasted one more year with the Celtics before spending the '70-71 season with the Sixers. That was his last run. Howell could have extended his career, but he chose to leave the game before he became a deep reserve.

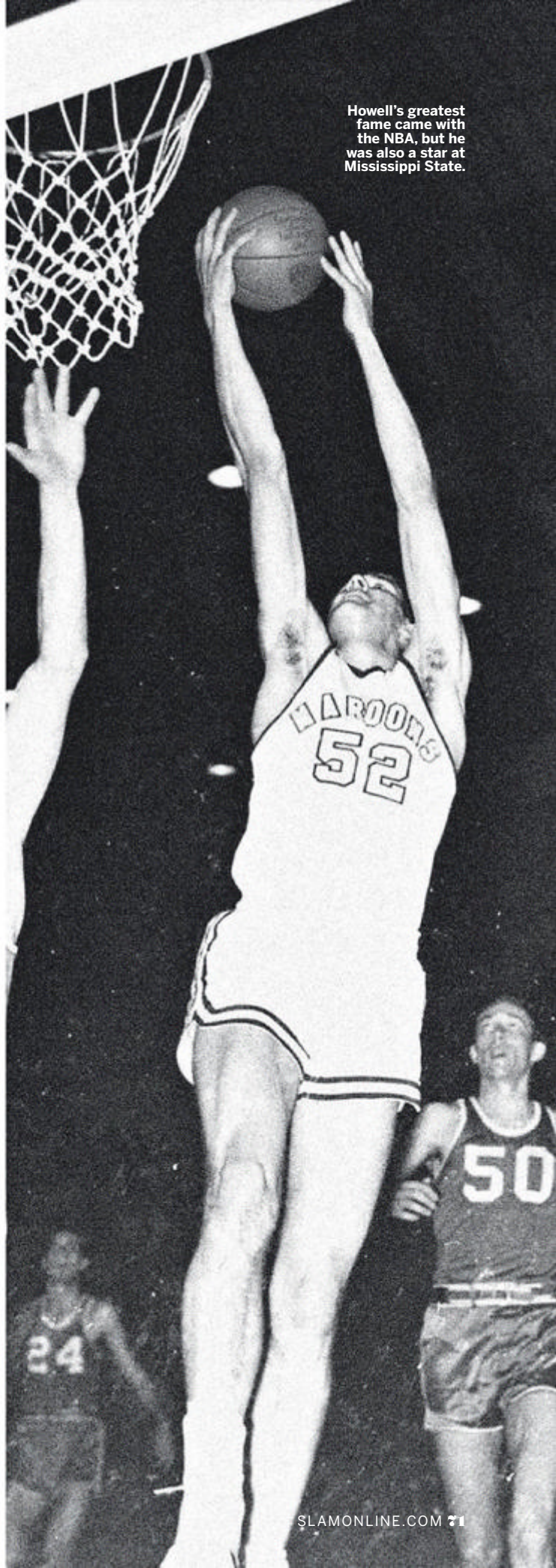
"At times [during the last year], I could play as well as I ever did, but night after night, I was behind some," he says. "I could have hung around and contributed at times, but I spent a lot of time on the bench. For most of my 11 years, I had played as many minutes as I could."

Howell took a job with Converse selling and promoting the legendary Chuck Taylor shoe that dominated the court. "For a long time, we were order takers, not salesmen," Howell says. He spent 23 years with the company before retiring to Starkville. He helped Mississippi State raise funds and relished a strong relationship with the school he served so well as a player and alumnus. Howell was inducted into the Naismith Hall of Fame in 1997, a well-deserved honor for a standout who had maximized his potential.

"A person should be judged on how close he gets to 100 percent of his talent," Howell says. "If I could make myself come to play every night, whether I was feeling good or bad, whether my legs were dead or whatever, I could compete."

And usually succeed. **S**

Howell's greatest fame came with the NBA, but he was also a star at Mississippi State.





THE FAN

**THERE ARE SO MANY WAYS TO REP YOUR TEAM.
WHAT'S YOUR STYLE?**

After the long regular season, the Playoffs are finally here! If you're like most of us, you've got your favorites and are ready to watch them go as far as they can. Whether you argue your case in the barbershop or on the blacktop, having the right gear will make your opinion that much stronger. Rock a Hawks jersey or a Spurs tee, it doesn't matter, just make sure you're heard, loud and clear.

To get your adidas NBA Playoff gear, head to NBASTore.com.



KICKS OFF COURT



adidas Originals ZX Flux Weave Out now, \$90



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Out now, \$110



Converse Star Player Out now, \$60



Converse Weapon 2.0 Out now, \$85



Jordan Instigator May 1, \$150



Jordan Future Low June 1, \$145



Jordan Eclipse May 1, \$110



K-Swiss Lozan III SDE Out now, \$75



Nike Air Max Zero Out now, \$150



Nike MetCon 1 Out now, \$150



Reebok Ventilator Out now, \$75



UGG Australia Fremon Out now, \$110



Under Armour SpeedForm Apollo
Out now, \$100



Under Armour SpeedFit Hike Boot
Out now, \$130



THE PLAYOFFS ARE COMING

AND THAT MEANS UPDATED VERSIONS OF NIKE BASKETBALL'S TOP SHOES ARE, TOO.

Since 2012, the postseason has also been Elite season—Nike Basketball's Elite Series is now in its fourth year running. This season, get ready for souped-up versions of the KD7, Kobe X and LeBron 12. Each player signature will get three separate editions, in each of three collections. First, on April 18, the Nike Elite Series Team Collection drops with team colorways for Bryant, Durant and James. On May 15 comes the Nike Elite Series Elevate Collection, which will feature blue sky-inspired colorways for all three

kicks. Then on June 5, the Nike Elite Series Rose Gold Collection drops with inspiration from the road to the NBA's Larry O'Brien Championship Trophy.

The Kobe X Elite represents a drastic change in silhouette from the original Kobe X—from low to high—resulting in what's nothing short of a performance beast. The first Flyknit basketball shoe ever constructed with recycled polyester yarn (each pair is made with what equates to five recycled plastic bottles), the X Elite is strong and breathable

thanks to a dynamic Flywire frame. Crafted by legendary Nike designer Eric Avar, the Kobe X Elite also features a cushioning system that combines Lunarlon, Nike Zoom Air and Nike Free-inspired technology all in one.

The Elite version of the LeBron 12, meanwhile, is built to handle the freight truck that is its namesake, with strategically placed Nike Zoom Air cushioning units to soften King James' flight landings. The six visible pods on the sole are engineered for multidirectional movement.

The LeBron 12 Elite is made from Megafuse construction, with a mesh composite wrapped by vertical wings.

Lastly, the strapless Nike KD7 Elite is built to be "light and tight" according to the brand, optimized to move naturally with the foot—especially since that foot is attached to the reigning NBA MVP. Designed by Leo Chang, the KD7 Elite also has Hyperposite construction in the upper and perforations to cut weight and increase ventilation.

—ABE SCHWADRON

Nike Inc., The Lab Boutique

BACK IN

Mixing a global view with a retail opportunity in a small corner of suburban New Jersey, The Lab Boutique is a store that fills a need.



The Lab Boutique is a new streetwear store owned by a man with much cultural depth and an ongoing quest for discovery. Similar to most labs, Djery "DJ" Larsen's shop is a sort of experimental space—where people, principles and style are explored and researched daily.

Larsen believes that a solid foundation begins with a healthy sense of adventure and comfortable shoes. The Lab Boutique, located in the Vauxhall neighborhood of Union Township, NJ, minutes from Newark and Maplewood, is the storefront representation of Larsen's credo. Having grown up with a mother who was an airline employee, he was able to travel from a young age, experiencing many cultures and styles. "My buddy from Tokyo looks nothing like me, and we know little of each other's words, but we dialogue through the shared common language of sneakers," Larsen says. "Meanwhile, my father was the neighborhood sneakerhead back in the 1980s. He was known for his full-on Lakers and Celtics get-ups with color-coordinated Converse Weapons."

Larsen essentially turned his dad's legacy and his mother's wanderlust into cash flow—opening a sneaker store in a corner of New Jersey where little retail shopping exists. Larsen even suggests that there is a subconscious relationship between sneakers and visiting foreign lands, as the root of athletic footwear and travel is to move, improve and appreciate beauty.—DR. L.A. GABAY

PUNKS

JERSEY STRONG

NJ-BRED POINT GUARD ISAIAH BRISCOE IS THE LATEST STAR RECRUIT HEADED TO LEXINGTON TO PLAY FOR COACH CAL'S KENTUCKY WILDCATS.

WORDS **FRANKLYN CALLE** ★ PORTRAITS **TOM MEDVEDICH**

Barely 24 hours after a 34-point performance and victory over Trenton Catholic at the South Jersey, Non-Public B Final, Isaiah Briscoe is back in the gym—prepping for Saturday's state title game against St. Anthony.

A video of last night's highly anticipated battle against the Garden State's other nationally ranked guard Malachi Richardson, a Syracuse-bound sharpshooter, is playing on a MacBook on the floor of the performance stage that stretches across the baseline of Roselle Catholic's gym.

Briscoe is a third cousin of Kyrie Irving from his dad's side, and in about five hours the Cavs' All-Star will be the talk

of sports following a 57-point outburst against the Spurs.

"Growing up, I was always overlooked," says the Kentucky commit while sitting on a desk in our classroom-turned-photo studio. "I had to work twice as hard as everybody else. They always used to say that I was overweight. But it is what it is. I am who I am. I was blessed with this body and I'm going to use it to my advantage."

While critics will point out he's not the quickest with the ball, he's become one of the most crafty PGs around, hence the nickname "Boogie."

Regarded as the next great PG from NJ, the Irving comparisons have been inevitable.

"I remember watching him in the stands," Briscoe recalls of

his cousin's days at St. Patrick. "Time goes by fast. I remember sixth and seventh grade just watching him at Kean [University] putting on a show. Selling out gyms. And now that's me."

Briscoe spent his first two years of high school on a star-studded St. Benedict's Prep squad, where he enjoyed a cumulative 69-5 record. He transferred to Roselle for his junior year, leading the school to the Non-Public B state title after averaging 22.1 points, 4.0 assists and 3.9 rebounds.

In an era when many top recruits' college decisions are strategically based on who's leaving and who's staying, and whether a starting spot will be awaiting them, Briscoe's approach offers a refreshing

contrast. He chose Kentucky before the season even started.

Having spent his first two high school seasons in a powerhouse that featured Milwaukee Bucks guard Tyler Ennis and current VCU guards Jonathan Williams and Melvin Johnson, Briscoe is more than comfortable hooping with other standouts and competing for playing time. And although joining John Calipari (who helped mold guards like Derrick Rose, John Wall and Tyreke Evans) and Big Blue Nation seems to be an obvious plus for anyone, there are "analysts" who don't quite concur.

With recent questions of whether all of UK's All-American guards could be returning, a mock draft that had Briscoe as a top-10 pick in the 2016 NBA Draft last fall now has his name completely off the list as of press time. Not like he's concerned.

"I'm not worried about who's there or who's leaving," says Briscoe, who helped Roselle repeat as state champs a couple of days after we spoke. "I'm going there to do what I got to do—contribute however I can. At St. Benedict's, we had so many good players that there was no time to slack. If I wasn't playing well, I had to sit down and watch. I've always been on my toes and never taken anything for granted. [Calipari] threw me right into that mix of names [of past elite guards he's coached]. That's big shoes to fill, but I'm sure that I can."



*"Growing up,
I was always
overlooked...
I had to work
twice as hard as
everybody else."*



PUNKS

TD DAILY

TYLER DORSEY
Pasadena (CA) Maranatha, 6-4, G

Just two days after Kyrie Irving exploded for 57 points in an OT win in March, highly touted senior guard Tyler Dorsey was doing his best impression of him at the Division IV Southern California regional quarterfinals. And the outcome wasn't too different. He finished with 52 points (no OT needed), sinking seven three-pointers just like the Cavs guard did—though he attempted 13 fewer field goals.

"I had a hot hand that night," recalls the 6-4 Oregon commit. "I was in attack mode. It was a great environment with the fans yelling, so I wanted to put on a show for them."

The career night, which put him in 20th place on California's all-time single season scoring list, came just days after having led his Maranatha squad to its first ever CIF Southern Section 4A championship.

After winning the state title at St. John Bosco as a junior, many were surprised when Dorsey announced last summer that he was transferring to Maranatha in his hometown of Pasadena for his senior year.

"I just wanted to come back and play for my city," says Dorsey, who spent the previous three years making the 45-minute-to-an-hour trip to Bellflower. "Just winning it for my school...my city. Putting up that banner—that was one of my proudest moments."

And now the Pac-12's second-best offense will welcome one of the nation's top scorers.

"I felt [Oregon] was the right place," says Dorsey, who averaged 34 ppg his senior year. "My game fits. I'm really excited and ready to play in Eugene." —FRANKLYN CALLE



OREGON TRAIL

KATIE MCWILLIAMS Salem (OR) South, 6-1, G

For more than a decade, Katie McWilliams, a Salem, OR, native, has made the short trip to Gill Coliseum to watch Oregon State basketball. So maybe it's fate that the 6-1 blue chip guard decided to become a Beaver.

Consider a picture of a past Civil War showdown, the classic Oregon-Oregon State rivalry, hanging in the office of Beavers head coach Scott Rueck. Says McWilliams, who was in the Gill stands that night, "It was a packed arena, and my dad and I are in this picture they chose."

Manufactured coincidence? Regardless, Rueck made McWilliams' recruitment an immediate priority when he took the Oregon State job in 2010. McWilliams can cycle through three perimeter positions (and even jumps center for her AAU team), but she is at her best navigating on-ball screens and reading the pick and roll. As a junior at South Salem High, she averaged 14.3 points, 7.3 rebounds, 3.5 assists and 2.4 steals. People usually tell her she should shoot more.

McWilliams uses future teammate Sydney Wiese as a reference point. Wiese is an elite shooter, but as McWilliams notes of the Beavers star sophomore guard, "She's pretty unselfish, and that's the same way I am. I like to pass first. But if I need to score, I can do that, too."

Wiese is also adept at running the pick and roll. Rueck puts it simply when asked about McWilliams. "When you look at Katie, I think people who know our program would say 'Perfect fit.'" —MATTHEW SNYDER



Kelly Kline: Clipplan.com, Trevor Paulhus, Darren Scarborough, Jon Lopez/Nike Basketball



BASKETBALL DIARY MALIK NEWMAN

We got it done, yah! Fourth straight state title. It just feels great. Everything that I set up to do, and said I would, I did it. It really has just motivated me even more.

From the jump I honestly thought we had a good chance at winning. I just knew that if we went out there and played our hardest, we'd get it.

Everything closed at like 10 that night, so I didn't really get a chance to celebrate. The next day, though, I celebrated with my team. Just a little get-together.

It's all actually kind of crazy. But at the same time, I can believe it because I put in all the hard work, as did my team and the coaching staff, each and every practice.

I gave the MVP trophy to my mom. She lives in Louisiana, so she doesn't get a chance to see a lot of the things I do. She mostly only gets to read about it. So anything that she can be a part of or anything that I can give to her, I try to do that. She has all my state championship MVP trophies.

My mom and dad told me how proud of me they were and said now, "On to the next chapter of life."

Also, winning Gatorade State Player of the Year again has been a blessing. That's the second year in a row. It's something that I wish I could've had all four years too, but just to be in the position that I am and for them to acknowledge and respect my game like that, it's pretty good.

Right now, with the high school season over, I'm just preparing for all the all-star games in April. Just training so I can go out and show that I'm one of the top players. I'm doing a lot of weights right now, just trying to get my body up and get bigger. Especially with college coming up next. So in the morning it's weights and getting up a few shots, then in the afternoon we just take a lot more shots.

In school, we're doing a lot of plays for the last term. I have to act in a play in front of the school at the end of the year. I don't know which book we're doing yet so I don't know which character I am. But I think I'm great at acting. Hollywood is always an option.

N.O.T.O.R.I.O.U.S.

CALEB SWANIGAN Fort Wayne (IN) Homestead, 6-9, C

Caleb Swanigan is on the phone a couple of nights after leading his Homestead (IN) team to the state semis, putting his squad within two wins of a first-ever Hoosier State title. With a top-10 spot in the 2015 class, McDonald's and Jordan Game invites, and a who's-who of big-time programs awaiting his college choice, Swanigan has plenty going on right now. But in large part—pun intended—it's his past that makes Swanigan so compelling.

For starters, he wasn't supposed to be thinking about college until next year: in May, he reclassified from the 2016 class, essentially skipping his junior year. Then there's the fact that the 6-9, 250-pound senior known as "Biggie" started high school at around 6-4, 350, a remarkable transformation on the way to becoming one of the best frontcourt prospects in the country. "In a way, it's hard to imagine how much bigger I was—sometimes I forget—but I just feel like it's part of growing up," he says now. "I feel great right now. I'm quicker, faster, and the more I get in shape, the more I can push myself. But I'm still big enough to hold my spot."

He's not joking, producing 20-and-10s like a factory. It's that sort of production that makes his college decision one of the most anticipated in the class. There's less of him than there used to be, but he's never been more in demand. —RYAN JONES



MAKE IT RAIN

DEJOUNTE MURRAY
Seattle (WA) Rainier Beach, 6-5, G

Washington Huskies coach Lorenzo Romar has never had a problem keeping the Emerald City's talent in state. Nate Robinson, Isaiah Thomas, Tony Wroten and Brandon Roy have all helped keep the local legacy alive.

Next to carry the torch is 6-5 senior Dejounte Murray from Seattle's Rainier Beach, who's been compared to another Beach alum, Jamal Crawford.

"He's his own person, and

I'm my own person," Murray says of the comparisons. "It's a good feeling, but at the end of the day, there will never be another Jamal. I'm still trying to get where he's at."

Murray has the handles, size and offensive game that leave fans, coaches and players shaking their heads. Just search his name and "Seattle Pro-Am" on YouTube.

During his senior campaign, Murray led the Vikings with 24.2 ppg, 13.5

rpg and 4.7 assists. His goal of winning four consecutive 3A Championships fell short after posting 15 points and 13 rebounds before falling to rival Garfield in the title game.

With offers from most of the Pac-12 and Gonzaga, he went with the loyalty and tradition at U-Dub.

"They came to every camp I was at, every game I had, all my high school games," he said. "They showed me they wanted me." —TY HAWKINS

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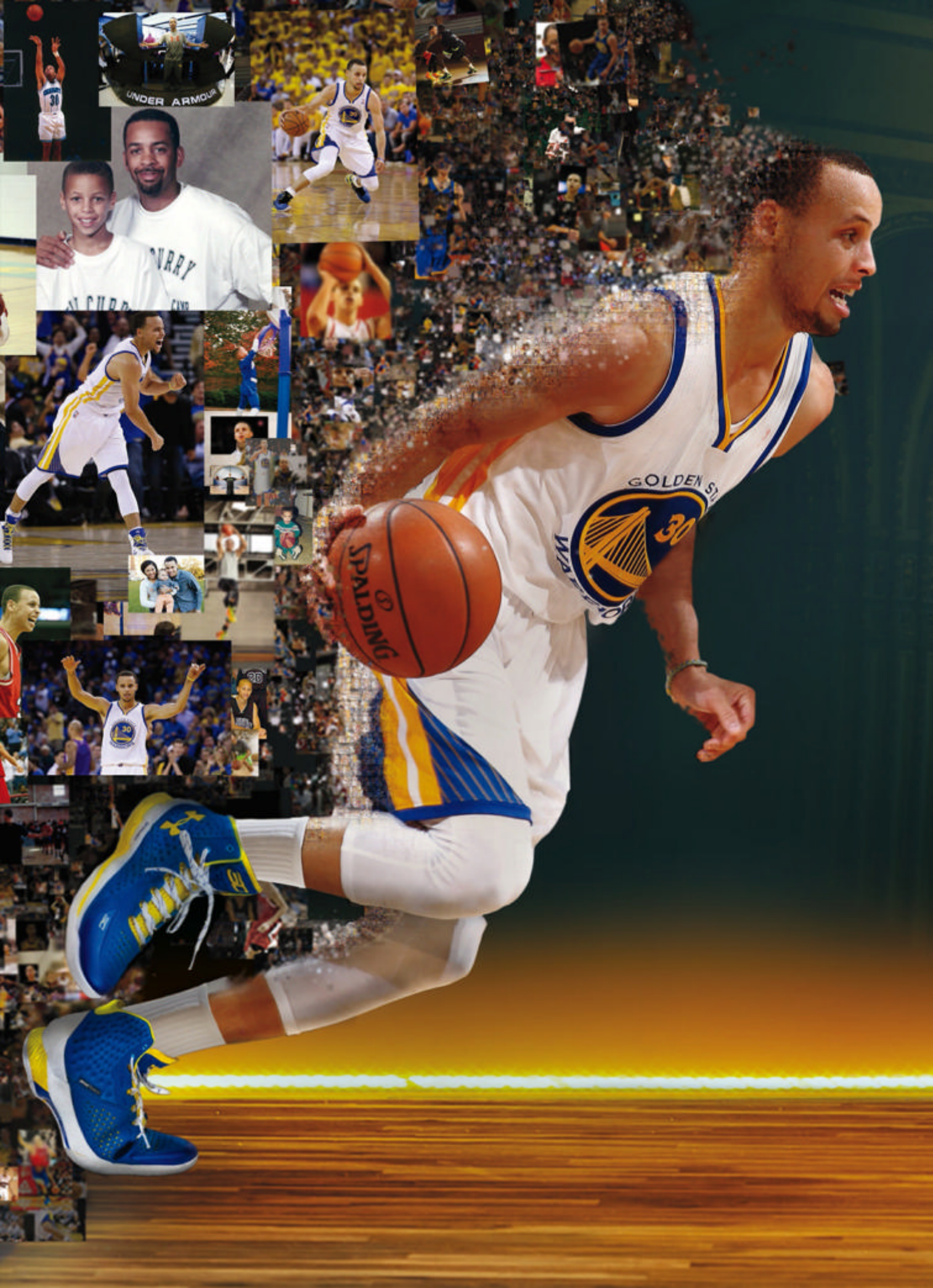


FROZEN MOMENT

NOTHING BUT PROMISE

*James Harden and Russell
Westbrook, May 11, 2011*

Just think: the runaway winner of the 2014 NBA MVP award is not even in this pic. The guys you do see are arguably the favorites for the 2015 MVP. And, back at one innocent time, all three of them played together. It was the spring of 2011, and the rollicking Thunder were on a nice Playoff run that seemed to portend nothing but NBA titles. Seemed, we said.





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